

Guided BY THE Faith of Christ



Seeking to Stop
Violence and Scapegoating

Stephen R. Kaufman, M.D.

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Introduction



Violence has plagued humanity since the dawn of civilization. In the last century, it claimed millions of lives, from individual murders such as the lynching of Blacks to the killing of millions in Rwanda and Nazi Germany. Can we overcome our predilection toward violence, or is it inevitable? If we are to prevent violence, we will likely need to understand its psychological, sociological, and anthropological underpinnings. The need to contain violence has become urgent because we now live in a world with proliferating weapons of mass destruction that threaten human civilization.

In attempting to explain why humans are predisposed to violence, several thinkers have provided important insights. This book will borrow heavily from the works of René Girard, Ernest Becker, and scholars who have been influenced by them.

Can Christianity help address the problem of violence? Some, noting the many past episodes of violence in the name of Jesus and God, have regarded Christianity as part of the problem. They doubt that Christianity can be part of the solution. However, I think that reasonable interpretations of the Bible – Christianity’s central text – accord with science’s discoveries about humanity, including why humans have a propensity for violence. Perhaps the Bible can also teach us how to live peacefully with each other.

The Bible has many themes, including God’s plan throughout history, how to form community, and how to lead a righteous life. Violence has important implications for these themes, and the Bible is replete with stories of killing, from the murder of Abel to the Hebrews’ bloody conquest of the Promised Land to the murders of John the Baptist, Jesus, and St. Stephen. Does the Bible teach that violence is an inevitable consequence of the struggle to survive outside Eden, or does the Bible offer guidance for surmounting violence?

Though many biblical stories depict God promoting peace and compassion, there are also many accounts in which God seems to

endorse violence and, occasionally, to participate in violence. I will examine biblical passages some Christians have used to portray God as wrathful and violent, and I will suggest different ways to regard these passages – ways that would condemn the Crusades, the Inquisition, the anti-Semitic pogroms, the enslavement of humans, the widespread mistreatment of nonhuman animals (hereafter “animals”), and the other harmful things that Christians and other people have done.

I suggest that reasonable interpretations of biblical stories are consistent with a view that God cares about all creation, that our human tendency to participate in violence undermines God’s desires, and that our adopting the faith of Christ¹ (Chapter 6) offers a path toward overcoming violence. I will not attempt to offer a complete systematic theology, nor will I try to fully review those systematic theologies that offer different understandings of Christian Scripture and faith. I will focus on selected passages that I regard as most relevant to this book’s theses. Similarly, although I cannot address all possible objections to my views, I will attempt to anticipate readers’ questions, particularly when my perspectives seem to conflict with currently popular theologies.

The first chapter explores certain insights from psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology that have helped us understand the sources of human violence. I will argue that the scapegoating process, which involves attributing excessive guilt to individuals and then expelling or punishing them, has generated and maintained communities for millennia. Will the scapegoating process forever prevent humanity from having just, peaceful communities, or can societies thrive in ways that accord with the biblical ideal of harmonious coexistence? Chapters 2 through 12 consider how a wide range of biblical stories and themes relate to violence in general and the scapegoating process in particular. I will explore the roles of faith, love, forgiveness, healing, peacemaking, and prophecy in overcoming the human tendency to participate in violence and scapegoating. Chapter 13 critically evaluates certain theological frameworks and parts of the Bible that many contemporary Christians have used to justify “sacred” violence done in God’s name. Chapter 14 applies the book’s biblical and anthropological frameworks to some contentious contemporary social issues. Throughout the book, I will explore how these themes relate to animal issues, which are frequently overlooked by those writing about social justice.

I aim to show that the faith of Christ, which Christians are called to emulate and which can inspire non-Christians, is a path toward overcoming our tendency to participate in the scapegoating process. It is a faith that does not require “believing six impossible things before breakfast.”² Rather, it is grounded in the social sciences and egalitarian ethics, and it gains strength from the biblical witness. It is a faith that can admit uncertainty and, in doing so, allows us to see how we, often unintentionally, contribute to violence and scapegoating. I maintain that the faith of Christ as depicted by the Bible can lead to personal and communal peace and harmony. It is faith that, perhaps, is essential for the salvation of human civilization.

Chapter 1: The Scapegoating Process



The sacrificial process prevents the spread of violence by keeping vengeance in check. . . The more critical the situation, the more “precious” the sacrificial victim must be.

René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 1979, p. 18.

Man is . . . split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground . . . blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with.

Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 1973, p. 26.

Universal Fear of Death and Its Effect on Human Behavior

Ernest Becker, standing on the shoulders of such intellectual giants as Otto Rank and Norman O. Brown, asserted that fear of death profoundly shapes human psychology and sociology. In *The Denial of Death*,¹ Becker noted that humans are animals, and indeed there is voluminous fossil, anatomic, physiologic, and behavioral evidence that humans and animals share a common ancestry. Behavioral studies, Becker observed, have shown that humans and animals have a survival instinct, and they all display fear when confronting deadly threats. However, Becker asserted that we are different from animals in recognizing that we are always vulnerable to death and in knowing that death is inevitable. People who have survived events in which death appeared imminent often describe a feeling of terror, and many other animals probably feel something analogous.

While the inevitability of death casts a shadow over our lives,² it not specifically the death of the body that terrifies the human psyche. Becker maintained that, at some level of consciousness, we are terrified of the extinction of the self – the “I” that forms our sense of personal

identity. How do we maintain equanimity in the face of impending death?

Rather than feel terror constantly, which would render us unable to perform daily tasks, people employ psychological defense mechanisms. One such defense mechanism involves projecting our fears about things that we cannot control onto things that we feel we can control. In *The Right Stuff*,³ Tom Wolfe wrote about military test pilots, who were often killed in unavoidable crashes. They frequently drove their cars at dangerous speeds. Evidently, they transferred their fear of death in flight, an event over which they likely felt little control, to fear of dying in an automobile accident, over which they had more control and which therefore was a more manageable fear. Driving dangerously could have given them a sense of mastery over death, which made them feel more confident that they could survive hazardous test flights.

Another defense mechanism involves projecting fears onto other people. For example, a middle-aged man with fears of bodily decay might project those fears onto his similarly aging wife, and then despise her for manifesting these bodily changes. Entire communities can project fears of vulnerability or death onto one or more persons, whom they treat with contempt or violence.

Our Fundamental Need for Self-Esteem

Each of us has a “self,” which relates to our sense of individual identity and, we sense, does not fundamentally change throughout our lives. “Self-esteem” is a sense of personal value and importance.

We think that we make decisions based on sound, reality-based judgments. However, many people probably do not realize that our conscious or unconscious hopes and fears can greatly distort our values and judgments. Some fears relate to events in early childhood that we cannot recall, and some fears are so terrifying that our minds try to repress them from consciousness. An example of the latter, Becker maintained, is fear of death, and he asserted that self-esteem helps to reduce or repress mortality fears. The need for self-esteem might be most obvious in children. They do not fear death per se, but they do feel vulnerable because they are surrounded by bigger and stronger people and because many accidental injuries come as complete surprises to them. They need self-esteem to have enough confidence to explore the world. Children gain a sense of self-esteem by mastering tasks, and they frequently mimic their parents and older siblings who, from the

child's perspective, are confident and competent.

Adults similarly find that self-esteem helps diminish fears that they will be killed.⁴ Those with good self-esteem tend to believe that they have the skills needed to manage dangerous situations and avoid harm. Also, self-esteem engenders a feeling of importance, which leads to a sense that "it couldn't happen to me." Evidently, many people feel that, if they are important, God, one of God's agents, or some other cosmic force will protect them from harm.

Self-esteem helps provide a sense of immortality. There is an intense psychological desire to believe that the "self" will not perish when the body ceases to function. We invariably generate mental images of what the world will be like after we die. If our self-esteem is low, we will more likely expect people to quickly forget us. If we feel important, we will more likely envision people long remembering us. These latter images will help give us a sense of what Becker called "death transcendence," which can comfort us psychologically. Another way that self-esteem can promote a sense of death transcendence is the belief that, as "good" people, God will reward us with everlasting paradise. We are not born with the knowledge of what we must accomplish to warrant the status of a "good person," and throughout our lives we receive a multitude of messages from our parents, friends, community, and larger culture about what we should do.

Becker argued that one's culture is the vehicle through which one gains self-esteem.⁵ We generally judge our worth according to the assessments of those in our community. What it means to be "good" varies widely between cultures. Some cultures encourage aggressiveness, and others value nonviolence. In some cultures, people revere those who acquire the most; in others those who share the most gain the highest regard.

Another way that culture promotes self-esteem is by providing myths about one's own group being admirable. People tend to divide themselves into groups defined by such features as geographic location, nationality, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, or gender and then regard "their" group as better than "other" groups.

Self-Esteem and Competition

A principle source of self-esteem is being "good" in relation to others, which invariably leads to competition. We can compete at an individual

level, such as in sporting contests or the pursuit of higher social standing, or we can compete at a communal level, for example by trying to assert the superiority of our own group over other groups.

Similar to humans, when animals compete for desired objects, such as social status, food, or a mate, they exhibit intense emotions. Afterward, however, animals' emotions quickly subside as they tend to change their focus to other concerns regardless of the outcome. Generally, they appear to show little or no resentment. While many animals seek to improve their social status, and those with inferior rank may challenge those with higher rank at opportune times, animals seem to have much less interest in revenge than humans. For humans, getting the desired object, such as a tasty food, an attractive mate, or a status symbol, means far more than satisfying an immediate desire – self-esteem is often at issue. Failure to obtain objects of desire can hurt our self-esteem and make us feel more mortal.

Importantly, self-esteem is not something we either have or do not have, like some material object. Our sense of self-esteem might increase or diminish throughout life, depending on our success in the marketplace, at sports, and in other competitions, and whether the larger culture affirms our “success” by praise, awards, and other forms of recognition. Though we struggle continuously to maximize self-esteem, we can never have enough self-esteem to fully quell mortality anxiety. Furthermore, if we feel humiliated, our self-esteem can suffer as long as the offender goes unpunished for the offense. The desire for revenge can so trouble our minds that we might be unable to feel at peace.

Experimental Validation of Becker's Theories

It seems that Becker's theories about fear of death have struck some people as obviously true, while others have remained doubtful. In an effort to test Becker's theories, researchers have developed Terror Management Theory (TMT). A broad range of TMT-inspired experiments have shown that thinking about death encourages people to defend their culture, to prefer people of similar ethnic background, and even to become violent.⁶⁻⁹ In many of these experiments, researchers asked people to think about what it would feel like to die and then to be dead, a concept the researchers called “mortality salience.” Interestingly, nearly everyone denied that these mental images were upsetting. However, subsequent testing indicated that they were deeply troubled

by the images, suggesting that people often do not recognize how much mortality salience disturbs them.

TMT has also shown the psychological importance of self-esteem. For example, studies have indicated that, for many people, raising self-esteem is a buffer against the effects of mortality salience on their opinions about their culture. For example, American subjects who were told that they had positive attributes after taking a bogus personality test were then instructed to think about their dying and being dead. These subjects were not nearly as offended by an essay that criticized American culture as other subjects who were similarly exposed to mortality salience but were told that they had only a neutral score on the bogus personality test.¹⁰

Remarkably, TMT studies have also demonstrated that mortality salience increases aggression. In one study, subjects were asked to read a political essay with which they agreed or disagreed. They were then told to administer a taste test to the essay's writer, in which the subjects supplied a quantity of hot sauce for the writer to taste. Those subjects previously exposed to mortality salience gave far greater amounts of hot sauce to writers of essays with which they disagreed than writers with whom they agreed. Subjects told to think about an upcoming exam rather than their own death did not give more hot sauce to writers with whom they disagreed than writers with whom they agreed.¹¹

Humans Are Primates Who Ape Each Other

Imitation is crucial to human social development because young children instinctively and unconsciously learn social skills and language by mimicking other people's behaviors. Similarly, adults, by observing others' attitudes and behaviors, recognize a wide range of threats and opportunities. Such imitation can also be the vehicle for spreading knowledge and other useful information as well as rumors, stigmas, and paranoia.

Social media facilitates this process because of its speed and anonymity.¹² A woman's career was ruined when she made a rather bad joke about white privilege, which led to millions of Twitter messages that falsely accused her of being racist. Resembling a lynch mob, Twitter members destroyed her career.¹³

The Unrelenting Pull of Acquisitive Mimetic Desire

All people have innate desires, including desires for food, being touched, and having social interactions. When there are no choices, people desire whatever meets their basic biological needs. For example, during famines, people desire any food, not specific foods. Most often, there are myriad ways that we can satisfy our desires, and we are not born knowing which we should choose. Girard, borrowing from psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, and literature, concluded that people determine what they want to acquire by seeing what other people seem to value. This “acquisitive mimetic desire,” Girard noted, is generally unconscious.

To illustrate acquisitive mimetic desire, a child in a room filled with toys will frequently want the one toy with which another child is playing. Although adults generally deny that their own desires are mimetic, the advertising industry exploits the powerful pull of mimetic desire generated by actors or celebrities who portray goods or services as extremely desirable. What passes for desirable can be quite arbitrary, can change over time, and can even vary among different subcultures. This shows how acquisitive desire is mimetic and often has little relation to the actual qualities of the object of desire. For example, during the Renaissance many men regarded a full figure as a standard of beauty among women, while female models and movie stars today generally have more slender figures.

We often have little conscious awareness of mimetic desires as they develop within us. We like to think that we choose objects for their inherent desirability. Such thinking helps maintain our sense of self-esteem. If we are attracted to a certain person, we will generally convince ourselves that this is because that person is inherently attractive, not because other people find that person attractive or because that person meets certain culturally defined standards of attractiveness. No doubt, our life experiences about what give us comfort and pleasure influence our choices. However, I think Girard has correctly identified acquisitive mimetic desire as an important factor in many of our specific choices.

Humans cannot avoid mimetic desire – it is part of our innate make-up. Importantly, there are different kinds of mimetic desire. In addition to acquisitive mimetic desire, Girard identified “good mimesis,” in which our model is someone with whom we cannot fall into rivalry. As we will see, Jesus was such a model.

One problem with acquisitive mimetic desire is that it invariably

leads to scarcity. Acquisitive mimetic desire encourages people to seek the same things, and demand invariably outstrips supply. Scarce things can include special foods, materials goods, and attractive mates. Also, esteem by peers is scarce because not everyone can be regarded as “successful” relative to everyone else. Indeed, scarcity often makes things more desirable because obtaining scarce things demonstrates one’s success, which increases self-esteem. However, failure to satisfy acquisitive mimetic desires generates resentment toward those who acquire the desired items.

In any culture in which self-esteem is associated with wealth, such as ours, there must be some individuals whom most people regard as “poor.” What it means to be poor varies among societies because wealth and poverty are relative terms. A wealthy person in one community might be regarded as poor in a much wealthier community. Because self-esteem is tied to wealth in materialistic cultures, those with wealth tend to walk a fine line. They often want people to envy them because this validates their sense of self-esteem. However, wealthy people do not want the envy to lead to such marked resentment that poorer people will want to steal from or even kill them.

Blinded by Anger

When people damage our self-esteem, we tend to feel anger and often blame others for our shortcomings. Even though we like to see ourselves as rational and objective, a strong emotion such as anger can readily overpower reason.

If I hurt someone physically or emotionally in anger, I would probably recognize my anger, but I would probably not attribute my hurtful actions to that anger. I would likely not acknowledge that I hurt someone because I was angry. Rather, I would likely consider my actions an appropriate response to the offense. I might regret that my anger had overpowered my self-control, but in defense of my self-esteem, I would likely conclude that their behavior, not my angry feelings, precipitated my hurtful actions.

Anger can damage relationships, which can be very harmful to families or communities. Our being mimetic can augment the destructive consequences of anger because we often respond mimetically to others’ emotional displays. Consequently, if I am angry at someone, that person will often respond with anger, which can increase my own

angry feelings. As my anger escalates, the tendency for anger to override reason has important implications. One of those implications, crucial for Girardian thought, is that anger can be easily displaced from the original object (e.g., my boss who has belittled me) to a substituting object (e.g., somebody weaker than I am, such as an underling at work, a family member, or an animal).

Communities can similarly displace anger. In primal cultures (i.e., those without modern technologies), survival has often depended on cooperative hunting and cooperative protection from predators. How can such cultures maintain cohesiveness, given the human tendency to develop mimetic rivalries that threaten to destroy bonds of loyalty or even lead to violence? The solution has often been to find a scapegoat. If everyone can agree that one individual has been responsible for the growing hard feelings that threaten a community, then punishing that individual can unify the community and defuse the conflict.

Scapegoating and Communal Discord

Scapegoating is effective at relieving the angry feelings and resentments that invariably arise as a consequence of mimetic rivalries. For scapegoating to restore tranquility, those involved in scapegoating must believe that the scapegoat is truly responsible for the social disharmony. Just as desire is mimetic, the accusation is mimetic. As anger spreads mimetically among the people, they readily convince each other that the scapegoat is responsible for the problem. To outside observers, the collective accusation may seem totally unfounded and irrational. To those caught up in mimetic accusation, their minds clouded by anger and their accusation reinforced by their neighbors, the accusation seems obviously true.

Who are the scapegoats? In general, scapegoats have been peripheral members of a community who can be abused without much fear of retaliation by family or friends. Indeed, what makes them different can be what people come to see as the manifestation of their evilness.

It is not hard to think of examples of scapegoating. Children often bond by collectively teasing and humiliating a child who the other children regard as “different” based on physical features or other attributes. Many families have a “black sheep” who is consistently accused of making trouble at family gatherings. If it were not for their collec-

tive contempt at this person's behavior, they would likely find themselves more at odds with each other. At a societal level, examples of communal violence – the Nazi Holocaust, the “ethnic cleansing” in the Balkans, the genocide in Rwanda, the Salem witch trials – have a common theme of scapegoating one individual or group of individuals to restore communal peace and a sense of well-being.

Guilt, Shame, and Scapegoating

I regard scapegoating as the transference of guilt or shame from the responsible individual or individuals to another individual or group. Whenever we fail or when others criticize or condemn us, we feel guilt or shame. Such feelings can injure our sense of self-esteem, and there is a strong temptation to convince ourselves that someone else deserves blame for our recent failure, social mishap, or general low social standing. When we fail as individuals, we are tempted to blame spouses for not supporting us, bosses for not recognizing our assets, or institutional policies that we consider unfair. When we fail as communities, we might blame social, political, or military leaders, or we might blame a minority group. The collective humiliation that the German people felt after the 1919 Treaty of Versailles encouraged them to seek a scapegoat. Consequently, Hitler's absurd claim that the Jews had betrayed Germany and were responsible for Germany's defeat appealed to many Germans. What about natural disasters, such as droughts, insect infestations, epidemics, or earthquakes? If there is no consensus for a scientific explanation, people generally attribute these disasters to divine punishment for one or more person's sins.

It is crucial that those involved in scapegoating convince themselves that the scapegoat is blameworthy.¹⁴ Several things make it easier to believe the falsehood about the scapegoat's guilt. First, when communities scapegoat, there is mimetic accord regarding the victim's guilt. Second, the community often behaves in ways that hide the truth. For example, when Stephen was stoned, people avoided hearing the innocent victim. They “cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears” (Acts 7:57). Third, since everyone has faults and has behaved badly at some time, anyone can be accused of misdeeds that deserve punishment. Therefore, in general, the injustice of scapegoating is not that the victims are blameless, though sometimes they are; it is that the victims are not as blameworthy as the scapegoaters claim. Fourth,

scapegoaters often believe that their actions accord with divine will, typically citing sacred texts or traditions. In these situations, people generally regard the scapegoating as a “sacred” activity.

Scapegoating in Primal Communities

Girard argued that scapegoating has been central to the development of culture. In order to make such a claim, he looked at the religious myths of primal cultures. Why not look at our own culture? First, our culture has experienced the growth of sciences that have raised doubts about religious myths. Sciences have provided evidence that the creation myths of all religions, if taken literally, are not reasonable. Second, as will be discussed later, our culture has been influenced by anti-sacrificial, anti-scapegoating teachings, including those of Jesus, in ways that make it difficult for people to believe that scapegoating violence really resolves social crises. Third, it is difficult to provide good examples of what people in our culture will agree constitutes scapegoating. The reason is that the scapegoating process requires that those who participate in scapegoating not recognize that they are transferring guilt onto victims.

In primal cultures, scapegoating has frequently occurred in response to communal crises such as natural disasters or hostilities related to mimetic rivalries. Typically, people start to suspect a marginal member of the community of casting evil spells or of angering the gods by violating a sacred taboo, such as a taboo against blasphemy or incest. With strong communal desires to blame someone for the crisis, the accusation becomes increasingly universal because accusation is mimetic. Community members, convinced by each other of the scapegoat’s guilt, ostracize, expel, or sometimes even kill the scapegoat. Remarkably, the crisis often ends after the scapegoating, which appears to confirm that the scapegoat victim was indeed responsible. Previously feuding communal members become united in their hatred of and collective actions against the scapegoat. In the case of a natural disaster, killing the scapegoat has often seemed to resolve the problem. Earthquakes and most other natural disasters rarely recur in the immediate future; droughts tend to end; and epidemics usually run their course. Consequently, events seem to confirm the validity of the collective accusation.

Myths, Rituals, and Taboos

Because scapegoating often accompanies resolution of the crisis and because the resolution has often seemed miraculous, people have tended to regard their communal violence against the scapegoat as divinely ordained. Girard held that primal communities have developed religions that feature myths, rituals, and taboos designed to prevent future crises. The myths have described how their gods have wanted sacrifices. Indeed, the “truth” of these myths has seemed obvious precisely because “sacred,” sacrificial violence has generally preceded resolution of a crisis. As long as relative peace and tranquility follow the sacrifices, it appears that the sacrifices have pleased the divine. The specific sacrificial rituals have aimed to reenact both the circumstances leading to the crisis and the original sacrificial violence that relieved the crisis. Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* has numerous examples.¹⁵

Religious myths identify taboos, the violation of which will anger the gods and create chaos and destruction. In general, taboo objects and activities are those that have seemed to contribute to fierce mimetic rivalries. Many cultures have taboos that delineate the power, wealth, and marital opportunities of the members of different castes, classes, genders, or other social groups. By restricting social opportunities, fewer people compete for power, luxuries, and attractive mates. In ancient Egyptian society, one’s choices were severely restricted by one’s class. There was virtually no personal freedom, and there was also little mimetic rivalry.¹⁶

People have generally defended taboos vigorously because people have been taught that taboos derive from instructions by the gods and because people have intuitively understood that taboos help maintain social order. Contemporary social reformers often contend that taboos have served primarily to maintain oppression of women, minorities, and poor people, and therefore they regard taboos as selfish attempts by those in power to restrict access to scarce resources. This accusation likely contains some truth. However, it also seems that taboos reflect widespread fears about what can lead to chaos. Frequently, many members of a community believe that social order would break down if members of a traditionally subservient group were put in a dominant position. This helps explain the vigor with which many Southern Whites once defended the subservient position of Blacks. Prior to passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, the notion of a Black foreman telling a White laborer what to do was abhorrent to

many Whites. Whites often said, “Everyone gets along down here.” However, “getting along” often included the threat of a violent response to Blacks who “didn’t know their place.” Thankfully, America has made great strides toward eradicating many unjust taboos, though many people continue to experience the pernicious effects of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of prejudice.

The vast majority of Americans now applaud efforts to eliminate unjust laws and social arrangements that have persisted by use of violence or threat of violence. However, removing unjust barriers to freedom of choice can increase the number of people seeking the same objects of desire, and it can increase the number of people who experience damaged self-esteem from failing to obtain these objects of desire. Consequently, a potential cost of social justice can be greater mimetic rivalry, conflict, and resentment. In later chapters, we will explore how we might increase social justice without increasing the risks of social unrest and violence.

Sacrifice and the Scapegoating Process

After a crisis and resulting punishment of a scapegoat, new or modified myths, rituals, and taboos arise. Girard reviewed the anthropological literature, and he found that all primal cultures either engaged in blood sacrifice or had myths and rituals that relate back to blood sacrifices. Further, Girard found that all primal cultures have myths that recalled one or more killings that were central to the creation of the world.¹⁷ This led Girard to conclude that “sacred,” collective, scapegoating violence originally brought people together. Further, ritual sacrifice, as an offshoot of scapegoating, has continued to unify communities ever since. People gain a sense of camaraderie through the collective activity of appeasing the gods through sacrifice.

Girard asserted that the social, political, and religious hierarchies that are central to human cultures derive from the scapegoating process.¹⁸ Many critics of religious and other institutions have denounced the violence or threat of violence inherent in hierarchies. However, Girard held that religions attempt to control violence, even though they typically do not address the underlying cause of violence. According to Girard, mimetic rivalries have generated violence, and these rivalries have always threatened to tear communities apart. Religious sacrifices have been attempts to limit violence by substituting small doses of

“sacred” violence for widespread outbreaks of “profane” violence.

Girard argued that, through mimetic accusation, nearly anyone can potentially satisfy the community’s need for scapegoating victims. This can account for the prevalence of animal sacrifices. People can easily accuse animals of being vehicles of evil spirits because it is easier to accuse, kill, and replace animals than people. Indeed, the term “scapegoat” derives from the ritual described in Leviticus 16:21-22, in which the community collectively transferred its guilt onto a goat. The goat was then sent into the wilderness, where the goat would probably die.

As we will see, animals are often victims of scapegoating today. If scapegoating animals as well as humans has played a crucial role in generating and maintaining our culture, we must find ways to stop scapegoating both animals and humans if we are to establish and maintain a just and peaceful society.¹⁹

Evidence for the Scapegoating Process

Girard and others have looked at a wide range of primal myths and found that they consistently both reveal and conceal the scapegoating process. They reveal the scapegoating process in that their creation stories typically relate how killing or expelling an individual created order from chaos. The myths conceal the scapegoating process by asserting that the gods approved the killing or expulsion.

For example, the central Hindu creation myth describes Purusha as a primal human being with grotesque features, a symbol for chaos. The gods dismembered Purusha, and everything on earth derives from his body. The priestly caste comes from Purusha’s head, the noble-warrior caste from his arms, the populace from his thighs, and the untouchables from his feet. If one deconstructs the myth anthropologically, one may regard Purusha as representing a real person who was collectively murdered, bringing peace and order to a chaotic community.²⁰ Girard has deconstructed many creation myths and associated rituals.^{21, 22}

In a given culture, there is no reason to doubt the truthfulness of the myths. The myths offer an explanation for the origins of the universe in general and their culture in particular. Further, the myths provide guidance for how people should lead their lives and to what achievements they should aspire. The myths address the intense human desire to understand where we come from, why we are here, and where we are going when we die. However, if the scapegoating process generates

human culture, then falsehoods about the victim's guilt underlie the myths that tell people what is right and wrong, what is meaningful and irrelevant, and what is true and false about the mysterious universe in which they live. A Girardian reading of the Bible suggests the scapegoating process is what "has been hidden since the foundation of the world" (Matthew 13:35), which Jesus exposed as a falsehood. Other religious leaders have also provided insight. Around the eighth century BCE, the later Hebrew prophets denounced the unjust violence of blood sacrifices.²³ In the sixth century BCE, the Buddha and Pythagoras rejected animal sacrifices, and the Buddha also condemned the caste system.²⁴

Contemporary Scapegoating: Humans and Animals

Most people believe that in this modern, "enlightened" era we have abandoned sacrificial violence. However, as in primal cultures, we likely have difficulty identifying our own scapegoating. Girardian theory posits that nebulous concepts such as national pride, family, and religion derive from and are maintained by the scapegoating process. Those who criticize cultural institutions are often falsely accused of being unpatriotic, anti-family, or sacrilegious. Critics often experience ostracism, harassment, or imprisonment – hallmarks of the scapegoating process.

The rise of humanism has helped secure human rights and, evidently, helped reduce the scapegoating of humans. However, it is possible that our culture participates in scapegoating as much as any previous culture, except that the victims today are more likely to be animals than humans. A clue that violence against animals has a "sacred" scapegoating element is that animal defenders often arouse great anger from the animal-exploiting general public. To be sure, one reason is that prohibiting activities that harm animals threatens to impact people's lifestyles because many people enjoy the taste of animal flesh, the "glamour" of animal furs, the challenge of the hunt, and the supposed benefits of animal experimentation and other forms of animal abuse. However, given that animal advocates pose no serious threat to nearly all of the ongoing, widespread uses of animals, the hostility toward animal defenders suggests that there is a sacred element to activities that involve harming animals. Perhaps animal advocates generate unreasonable ire because they challenge the validity of certain myths, rituals, and taboos around

which many people orient their lives.

Many animal protectionists note that humans are animals, a view that seems to contradict the myth²⁵ that humans are special creations with unique importance to God. Humanity's relationship with the natural world in general and animals in particular reminds people of their own mortality. To many people, animals seem to lead meaningless lives characterized by struggle and ending in anonymous death. It is not always evident to the casual observer that animals actually have rich and meaningful lives.²⁶ Killing animals gives humans a sense of superiority and a sense that they are fundamentally different from the animals. The act of eating animals – consuming their very bodies – can reinforce these convictions.²⁷ This might help explain the horror many humans feel when hearing stories about people being eaten by animals. It reminds people that they are vulnerable to death and also that they are made of flesh. Along these lines, many cultures deal with corpses in ways that help people avoid seeing human flesh decompose, and the prohibition against cannibalism is nearly universal.

Projecting Illicit Desires onto Animals

Many of us feel guilty about our socially unacceptable desires. For many of us, a sense that God condemns anyone who has such illicit desires augments these feelings of guilt. It seems that many people resolve this concern by projecting their own forbidden sexual, violent, or other desires onto animals.

Regarding sexuality, human sexuality has myriad mimetic, cultural, and biological influences that frequently conflict with each other, and these often lead to inner turmoil and interpersonal difficulties. Nearly everyone has desires that, if fulfilled, would violate one or more of our culture's many taboos related to sexuality. Rather than acknowledge their own illicit, if often unfulfilled desires, humans often express contempt for animals' sexuality. Though animals are generally very selective about their sexual partners, on the surface animals often seem uninhibited about sex, perhaps because many animals, unlike most people, often have sexual intercourse in the presence of other members of their species. Consequently, people can deny their unacceptable sexual desires by feeling contempt for animals, who seem to engage in unrestrained sexual behavior.

Regarding violence, people have similarly tried to justify their own

violence by distinguishing their violence – which they regard as righteous or just – from that of animals. This is ironic, because it appears that humans are far more inclined to injure or kill unnecessarily or to seek vengeance rather than reconcile after conflicts. Indeed, people often call violent criminals “animals” or “beasts,” which implicitly denies the possibility that the rest of us might harbor violent desires similar to those of criminals. Because we do not want to feel guilt and shame, and because we want to believe that we are good and worthy of God’s favor, there are strong motivations to project our own unwanted desires onto scapegoats. Animals, who cannot protest unfair characterizations, can easily fill this role. If we then feel contempt for animals for supposedly having immoral desires, we might convince ourselves that we do not harbor those desires.

The error underlying scapegoating is almost always the same whether the victims are humans or animals. To alleviate guilt or shame, scapegoaters project those weaknesses and flaws onto victims. Scapegoaters objectify their victims and do not see their victims as individuals who, like them, can feel pain and pleasure and who, like them, desire to live. Instead, scapegoaters see a caricature that greatly magnifies the victims’ flaws and fails to recognize the victims’ experiences as sentient beings.

Such a view makes it easier for people to maintain a positive self-image while simultaneously endorsing the exploitation and abuse of animals for food, labor, entertainment, and other purposes. Humanity today is probably responsible for more animal suffering and death than at any other point in history.²⁸ Even though most people say they oppose mistreatment of animals, most support cruelty to animals. Most people, for example, regularly consume the products of factory farms, where animals typically experience immense suffering due to intense, stressful crowding, painful mutilations without painkillers, and frustration of nearly all their natural behaviors.

People often justify animal exploitation and abuse on the grounds that the animal victims are ugly, dirty, or stupid; that they are merely instinctive; or that they are unable to suffer as people do. However, many of the self-serving distinctions between human nature and animal nature reflect misunderstandings of both.²⁹ A large body of scientific research contradicts the notion that animals are unthinking and driven entirely by instinct.³⁰ In fact, many animals display impressive reasoning and communicative skills, form complex social networks, and have rich emotional lives.³¹ Finally, there is overwhelming

evidence that animals can experience pleasure and pain similar to what humans experience,³² and even animals who are evolutionarily remote from humans appear to have the capacity to suffer.³³ Indeed, the similarity in feelings, emotions, and many mental attributes between humans and many animals is readily apparent, even to casual observers.

Self Esteem and Dominating Animals

In our pursuit of self-esteem, there are always winners and losers when people compete against each other. However, the ability to dominate or kill an animal can give anyone a sense of self-esteem. A trapping handbook relates, "While many youths develop interest in sports or good grades in school, some do not when they realize that they cannot excel. . . Any young person, regardless of social advantages, can excel and be an achiever by catching the big fish of the day, or making a nice shot, or catching a mink."³⁴ There will always be victims as long as the path to self-esteem requires dominating others. And, there will always be victims if, as Girard argued, the scapegoating process plays a crucial role in generating and maintaining human culture and community.

Of course, human motivations are complex and multifactorial. The scapegoating process, particularly if understood in the context of the human need for self-esteem, can explain much human violence. Meeting basic biological needs, such as food, sometimes results in harm, but I do not think that violence should include acts of necessity. Though many general desires are quite universal among humans, such as desires to experience sensual pleasures and enjoy human company, the specific items that best satisfy these desires are tied to mimesis. And, the importance of gratifying desires is tied to self-esteem.

Must there be human or animal losers for people to gain self-esteem? If so, there would seem to be no hope of transcending the tendency to participate in the scapegoating process. As discussed in future chapters, Christianity (as well as other faiths and convictions) offers an alternative.

Summary

Self-esteem is an important salve to relieve the universal fear of death. We gain self-esteem by successfully competing for objects of desire. Desire derives from mimesis – observing what other people seem to desire. The resulting competition invariably leads to scarcity, which causes conflicts that can tear communities apart. The scapegoating process, in which one or more individuals is blamed for conflicts or crises, unifies and maintains community. Sacrificial violence reinforces this camaraderie and helps prevent future conflicts. To build communities free of victims, we must somehow overcome the universal tendency to participate in the scapegoating process. Our search for a solution begins with the Hebrew Scriptures.

Chapter 2: The Hebrew Scriptures



Challenges to the Bible's Credibility

One contentious issue among Christians is whether or not the Bible is inerrant. Those who assert that the Bible is a perfect transcription of God's words generally justify this stance by claiming that the Bible is remarkably consistent, that it has reliable witnesses, and that it has correctly predicted future events.¹ However, massive scientific evidence and biblical scholarship contradict these claims.²

Voluminous paleontological, geological, astronomical, and other evidence is incompatible with a literal reading of the Bible. The Bible indicates that the earth does not move (1 Chronicles 16:30; Psalm 93:1, 96:10, 104:5), that the sun circles the earth (Joshua 10:13; Ecclesiastes 1:5), and that the earth was created in six days (Genesis 1:1-2:3) approximately 7,000 years ago. If we were to reject scientific rationality, then logically we would be forced to reject any rational arguments for our religious beliefs. We would then be forced to abandon logic-based and scientific claims for the Bible's truth, such as claims that it is consistent, has reliable witnesses, or has predicted future events.

Modern scholarship has raised doubts about many biblical details. Ann Wroe has concluded that nonbiblical texts and archeological discoveries paint a different picture of Pontius Pilate from that in the Gospels.³ Ancient writers routinely put words in the mouths of real historical people, which evidently many people regarded as acceptable as long as the writers' accounts pointed toward truths. In ancient times, great spiritual leaders were healers; therefore, those aiming to demonstrate that a person was a great spiritual leader often depicted that person as a healer. Similarly, to gain wider acceptance of their views, authors often used pseudonyms, signing their writings with names of respected writers, such as Paul. Indeed, most scholars now hold that many canonical letters attributed to Paul, including 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and possibly 2 Thessalonians and Ephesians, were written by other authors.

Some Christians cite 2 Timothy 3:16 as evidence for the Bible's inerrancy: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." However, when 2 Timothy was written, there was no New Testament; it was canonized in the fourth century. Therefore, 2 Timothy 3:16 could not have been referring to the Bible we use today.⁴ Further, only a few of the many gospels and epistles that early Christian churches used and revered were incorporated into the Bible, and during the first 300 years after Jesus' death great controversies arose as to which documents were authoritative.⁵

There are additional difficulties with the biblical inerrancy theory related to linguistics⁶ and to problems inherent in translating from original texts.⁷ Nevertheless, one does not need to believe that the Bible is inerrant to believe that the Bible's stories, revered for thousands of years, provide profound insights into human nature, community, and humanity's relationship with the earth, animals, and God. By "God," I mean the great cosmic mystery, which is related to the origin of matter, life and consciousness.

For me, one of the Bible's most compelling and inspiring overarching themes is that God is about love and compassion. No doubt Christianity has a violent history, including the Crusades and the Inquisition, but I will argue that such violence has relied on selective, dubious readings of the Bible that do not account adequately for the Bible's historical and sociological contexts. I will also seek places where the Bible and scientific evidence concur. Though science does not provide absolute certainties, it has proven to be a powerful tool for understanding humanity and for discerning the workings of nature.

Mimesis in the Garden of Eden

The creation stories of many religions explain the origins of evil and suffering. Remarkably, the Judeo-Christian creation story recognizes the importance of acquisitive mimetic desire in generating conflict and misery. According to this story, Adam, Eve, and all creatures initially lived together peacefully:

And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And . . . to everything that has the

breath of life, I have given every green plant for food” (Genesis 1:29-30, Revised Standard Version).

There was no violence or death in Eden. God created Adam and Eve in God’s image, and God’s desires should have been the model for their desires. God wanted harmonious coexistence among all living things, but Adam and Eve exhibited mimetic desires, which invariably led to conflicts.

The serpent tempted Eve, awakening desires that opposed those of God and threatened the blissful harmony among all of Eden’s inhabitants. Adam and Eve, as humans, could not avoid having mimetic desires. However, instead of having God as their model, Eve took the serpent as model, and Adam took Eve. Adam and Eve became rivals with God for the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Consequently, they would find it impossible to serve God by being loving, compassionate, respectful stewards of Eden.

When God discovered their disobedience, Adam blamed Eve, which constituted scapegoating in that Adam attributed his own guilt to Eve. Likewise, Eve then blamed the serpent. In disharmony from God and each other, God banned Adam and Eve from Eden, which I regard as a metaphorical description of the social disruption that derives from the scapegoating process. In rivalry with God for dominance in Eden and in conflict with each other for moral justification, Adam and Eve no longer had a fully loving relationship with God or each other. Concerned that they might eat from the tree of life and live forever (Genesis 3:22), God expelled them from the Garden and forced them to struggle to obtain food, clothing, and shelter. In contrast to the ideal in the Garden of Eden, in which Eve was a companion and not an inferior person (Genesis 2:20-25), it was ordained that “he [Adam] shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16).

Similarly, harmonious relationships with animals were broken. The Bible relates that henceforth there would be enmity and violence between humanity and the serpent (Genesis 3:15). This is the tragic, broken world in which we live, a world that, the Bible indicates, can only be fully reconciled by divine intervention.

Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: Self-Consciousness Emerges

Why was the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil forbidden? I offer some thoughts drawn from the social sciences while acknowledging that I regard the Garden of Eden story as a parable and not as a historical account.

The evolutionary process involves modifications of traits as species adapt and evolve. Consequently, one would not expect there to be any uniquely human attributes. However, certain attributes might be distinctly developed in a given species. The desires of most animals appear ephemeral and material, such as satisfaction of hunger or sexual cravings. However, as our distant prehuman ancestors became increasingly aware of the inevitability of their deaths, they came to experience more anger, bitterness, and resentment when they lost competitions for objects of desire. Gaining the objects of their desire impacted their senses of self-esteem, making their desires increasingly persistent and symbolic.

As a parable of humanity's origins, I think the Garden of Eden story describes the emergence of what we might call human self-consciousness, which has features that are distinctive from the self-consciousness of animals.⁸ Human self-consciousness gives us the ability to recognize that we are each a living being distinct from all others. We can imagine how others perceive us, and we can empathetically imagine how we would feel if we experienced what others experience. This ability to see things from other perspectives allows us to envision different possibilities emanating from a given situation. Therefore, to the degree that prehumans lacked this kind of self-consciousness, they were likely unable to perceive evil because recognizing evil requires an ability to recognize that other, better possibilities could arise from a given situation. Prehumans surely experienced suffering and fear, but most likely they had little capacity to view these experiences as "evil." Prehumans tried to avoid pain and death, but they did not seek to understand why the world included pain and death because they could not imagine other possible realities.⁹ Without these cognitive skills, prehumans generally experienced the world as resembling the biblical Garden of Eden. They usually had enough to eat, they were not preoccupied with worries about possible future food shortages, and they were ignorant of the inevitability of their demise.

Gaining human self-consciousness, humans saw themselves as actors in a world in which they might suffer or be killed at any time, and

they would definitely die eventually. This describes the effect of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Knowing good and evil, humans could no longer relate to God and God's creation as peaceful and harmonious. Fearing possible suffering and certain death, humans came to see the world as full of danger, competition, strife, and loss, even in the absence of immediate dangers or challenges. Therefore, the human ability to distinguish good from evil, a consequence of human self-consciousness and abstract thinking abilities, made it impossible for humans to experience nature as the mythical Garden of Eden. Even though Eden appeared to provide for everyone's needs, Adam and Eve's fears of possible scarcity would have encouraged them to hoard, which would have generated actual scarcity. Therefore, Genesis describes humans initially experiencing nature as harmonious, but their knowledge of good and evil transformed humans into fearful creatures who experienced nature as threatening and who, consequently, have wreaked havoc on other creatures.

This, I suggest, is why God expelled Adam and Eve, lest they eat of the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-23). If Adam and Eve gained immortality, their fear of suffering would forever endanger the other living beings in the Garden.

Scapegoating Begins

It is noteworthy that, after eating the forbidden fruit, "The eyes of both were opened" (Genesis 3:7), which I regard as metaphorically describing their gaining human self-consciousness. With such self-consciousness, Adam and Eve could regard themselves as a third person might see them. In a world of mimetic rivalries, it is an effective strategy to convince rivals that their natural desires are shameful. Indeed, a hallmark of abusive relationships is that victims believe that they are not worthy of having their own desires fulfilled. Consequently, Adam and Eve felt guilty about their sexual and other desires, and they covered themselves with fig leaves. This guilt was compounded by the concern, made possible by the human capacity to imagine how God might view them, that their illicit desires and actions would result in divine condemnation. Consequently, Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent for their transgression, and humans have been transferring guilt and shame onto other individuals – i.e., scapegoating – ever since.

Humans no longer feel as if they live in the metaphorical Garden

of Eden. Deprived of the fruit of the tree of life, they fear death, which leads to a sense of disharmony between humans and God, between humans and each other, between humans and animals, and between humans and the rest of the natural world.

The First Victim of Scapegoating

Expulsion of the victim through ostracism, banishment, or murder characterizes scapegoating. Girard maintained that the origin stories of primal religions depict one or more murders that relate to actual killings. Because the murderers were the ones who related the events and because they believed their actions were justified, the accounts of the killings typically asserted the victim's guilt regardless of their actual culpability. Indeed, Girard argued, this has been the purpose of myth – to hide the truth that human culture is grounded on murder, and that murder (via the scapegoating process) continues to bind human communities. The Hebrew Scriptures are remarkable in that they frequently recognize the victim's innocence.

The account of Abel's murder illustrates this well. The story begins by noting that God "had regard" for Abel's sacrifice, but not Cain's (Genesis 4:3-5). Cain's countenance fell because he experienced mimetic rivalry with Abel. God seemed to prefer Abel's offering, and Cain was unable to control his jealous rage. Cain was a "tiller of the soil" (Genesis 4:2) who did not have animals available for sacrifice, and Abel was his only human companion. Consequently, Cain was unable to displace his anger onto an animal scapegoat, which encouraged him to vent his wrath upon Abel.¹⁰

Interestingly, God had said to Cain, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). In other words, God told Cain that God would judge Cain on his own merit, not on how he compared to Abel. Nevertheless, Cain's acquisitive mimetic desire led to mimetic rivalry that predisposed to sin. He needed to master his acquisitive mimetic desire or suffer tragic consequences. Not heeding God's counsel, Cain killed Abel.

Then, after Cain denied knowledge of Abel's disappearance, God said, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10). This is the first of many times that the Hebrew Scriptures relate the voice of the victim, which God hears.

Violence, like other behaviors, has mimetic qualities. Consequently, Cain, fearing reciprocal (mimetic) violence against himself, said, “Whoever finds me will slay me” (Genesis 4:14). God prevented escalating violence by putting an identifying mark on Cain and declaring, “If anyone slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold” (Genesis 4:15). At this point in human development, threat of revenge could keep the peace, but the later prophets and the New Testament tended to describe God as preferring love and compassion as the path toward peaceful coexistence.

The Flood

The Bible relates that God delivered the Flood because “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence” (Genesis 6:11). Because violent behavior is mimetic, there seemed no prospect for peace. If God desired a world of peaceful coexistence, God would need to re-create the world, starting with Noah, his family, and representatives of every kind of animal. After the Flood, God made a covenant with Noah, his family, and all the animals not to deliver another flood (Genesis 9:10, 9:12, 15-17). God recognized that there would still be violence, and he told Noah,

The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth . . . into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning . . . Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:2-6).¹¹

Noah’s taste for flesh came with the curse that the animals, who had once lived harmoniously with humans, now feared and dreaded Noah. God gave Noah permission to eat animals, but many theologians have seen this as a concession, not a command. There are other examples in the Bible in which God permitted certain activities but did not bestow a blessing or endorsement. God allowed the Hebrews to have a king, even though God warned that kings abuse their subjects (1 Samuel 8); and Moses, on behalf of God, permitted men to divorce on account of their “hardness of heart” (Deuteronomy 24:1-

4; see Matthew 19:8; Mark 10:4-5). The Apostle Paul wrote that permitted things are not necessarily desirable (1 Corinthians 6:22, 10:23). Although the ancient Hebrews believed that their scriptures permitted meat consumption, they also believed that the blood carried the life force, and the prohibition against consuming blood reminded the Hebrews that all animals' lives ultimately belong to God.

Noah might have been righteous by the standards of his day, but he was still a product of a violent world and he was far from perfect. After harvesting grapes from his vineyard, Noah got drunk and fell asleep naked. Ham saw his father in this disgraceful state and informed his brothers, and Noah then cursed Ham and Ham's son Canaan. This story illustrates that even Noah, the best of his generation, could be violent, impulsive, and prone to scapegoating in that there was dubious justification for cursing Ham and no reason to curse Canaan. Evidently, Noah was prone to violence, and perhaps God allowed Noah to kill animals in an effort to contain his violence. Because God promised to not deliver another flood (Genesis 9:11), God had to give Noah an outlet for his violent tendencies. Does this demonstrate God's indifference to animals? I do not think so. Humanity was uncontrollably violent, yet the Bible relates that God hoped that all creation would one day live in peace (Isaiah 11:6-9, 65:25). The first step would be to prohibit killing humans since animals are far less inclined than humans to hold long-term grudges, seek vengeance, and participate in retaliatory violence.

The Story of Abraham and Isaac: Sacrificial Violence

The Hebrew patriarchs faced real difficulties, sometimes heroically rising to the occasion and sometimes showing poor judgment. Importantly, many stories about them are ambiguous, challenging the reader to discern the stories' meanings and whether the participants acted properly. In one such story, God tested Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19). Should we admire or condemn Abraham for planning to abide by God's command?

Abraham believed that God expected him to sacrifice Isaac, and many ancient cultures prescribed human sacrifices, particularly child sacrifices, to their gods. If God wanted Abraham to kill Isaac, God would have resembled the deities to which countless societies have made human sacrifices. Remarkably, there was a radical and dramat-

ic twist. At the last moment, an angel commanded Abraham not to kill Isaac. Though there are many ways to interpret this story, I think one reasonable inference is that the story lays a foundation for an understanding of God as one who “desires mercy and not sacrifice” (see Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13, 12:7). Abraham then saw a ram caught by his horns in a thicket. Abraham believed that God directed him to sacrifice the ram as a substitute for Isaac, but interestingly the text does not mention that God instructed or wanted Abraham to sacrifice the ram.

Although some regard this story as validating the notion that God sometimes desires sacrifices, there is ambiguity. Abraham neared the point of sacrificing Isaac, but we cannot know whether Abraham would have carried out the sacrifice if he had not seen the ram and conveniently concluded that a substitution was God’s intention.

The Story of Jacob and Esau: The Role of Rivalry in Scapegoating

The story of Jacob and Esau illustrates acquisitive mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry. It is one of many stories in the Hebrew Scriptures that depict brothers in conflict. As anyone with children knows, siblings almost always fall into rivalry with each other because their self-esteem depends largely on how they perform in relation to each other. In this story, Jacob and Esau struggled in Rebekah’s womb (Genesis 25:22), and Jacob was born grasping Esau’s heel (Genesis 25:26), which portended Jacob’s pursuit of the inheritance and blessing that were rightfully Esau’s.

Jacob and Esau’s parents spurred the sibling rivalry, with Rebekah favoring Jacob and Isaac preferring Esau. Jacob, with Rebekah’s assistance, capitalized on Esau’s impulsiveness to gain both the inheritance and their father’s blessing. As often happened in the Hebrew Scriptures, the younger brother prevailed over the older brother. This undermined notions of the “sacred order” because tradition held that the older brother should have assumed family leadership.

Fearing Esau’s wrath, Jacob fled. Later, Jacob’s struggle with an angel of God prepared him to meet Esau (Genesis 32:24-31).¹² Once reunited, Jacob bestowed his father’s blessing upon Esau and they made peace. As James Williams observed,¹³ this story is about mimetic rivalry resolved without violence. Jacob neither scapegoated nor was scapegoated.

A distinctive feature of the Bible is that the younger sons first endured ordeals in which they were victims and then prevailed, e.g., the near-sacrifice of Isaac, the flight of Jacob from Esau's wrath, and Joseph's travails. Having endured emotional and/or physical violence, younger brothers might have more readily understood the victim's perspective.

The Story of Achan: "Sacred" Violence Shifts Blame

Joshua 7 relates a story about the Hebrews' conquest of the Promised Land. Their repeated triumphs seemed to confirm that God had ordained their territorial acquisition. Then, they suffered a humiliating defeat at Ai when Joshua, acting on poor scouting information, sent an insufficient number of soldiers to the battle. The story asserts that the defeat was a consequence of someone violating God's command not to take the spoils of victory from Jericho. The story describes God directing the authorities to Achan, and spoils were found in his tent. After Achan confessed to the crime, he and his family were killed and all their property was destroyed.

One can read this story literally and conclude that God ordained Achan's punishment for violating God's command. Or, one can read this story as an example of scapegoating.¹⁴ In support of the latter explanation, as commander-in-chief, Joshua would be held accountable for the debacle at Ai. He was at risk for becoming a scapegoating victim of the crisis arising from defeat, unless he could shift the blame. Recall that crises lead to a breakdown of the myths, rituals, and taboos. In this case, there was a risk to Joshua that the crisis would undermine the taboo against challenging the legitimacy of divinely ordained leaders.

Achan confessed, but it is possible that the confession was under duress and that the spoils were planted by Joshua's agents. Alternatively, perhaps there were rumors that Achan had taken gold at Jericho. Joshua then acted on that knowledge to blame Achan for the military defeat.

Achan was stoned to death and his family was likewise stoned, perhaps to prevent anyone from coming forward to assert Achan's innocence. Then, Achan's belongings were destroyed, possibly for the same reason that the soldiers were forbidden from plundering Jericho – bitter competition for the spoils could divide Joshua's powerful army.

A literal reading of this story is troubling. It suggests that God is vengeful, not only against the guilty party, but also against his innocent relatives. A Girardian reading posits that Joshua shifted blame from himself onto Achan. Joshua attributed the accusation to God, which is typical of communal scapegoating, and he utilized mimetic accusation to convict Achan. Once Joshua accused Achan, it is likely that others quickly joined the chorus, eager to punish the evil person responsible for the military defeat and possibly also eager to avoid being accused themselves.

The Changing Role of Sacrifice throughout the Hebrew Scriptures

Sacrificial violence often involves scapegoating. Therefore, the prescriptions for sacrifices described in Leviticus present problems for those seeking a non-scapegoating reading of the Bible. Likewise, Jews and Christians who believe that God cares about animals have been troubled by passages in which God accepts or even encourages killing innocent animals.

Leviticus repeatedly refers to the proper way to make sacrifices of animals or plant foods if one wished to make an offering to God. In general, Leviticus does not portray God commanding animal sacrifices. The ancient Hebrews lived among human-sacrificing and animal-sacrificing peoples, and arguably they could not imagine that God had no desire for blood sacrifices. They were convinced that sacrifices were necessary to approach God in prayer or to appease God after one had transgressed God's laws. Interestingly, the Hebrew law treated all slaughter as sacred sacrifice and mandated the participation of a priest who ensured that the slaughter abided by the humane standard of the day. One who disobeyed this law "shall be cut off from among his people" (Leviticus 17:4).

Certain offenses in some primal cultures have called for human sacrifice, and perhaps the Levitical sacrificial codes prescribed animal sacrifices as substitutes for humans. Numbers 31:30 and 31:40 describe human sacrifices ordained by God, and Abraham was on the verge of sacrificing his first-born son to God (Genesis 22:9-13). Several passages condemn human sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31, 18:9-12; 2 Kings 16:3; Psalm 106:38; Jeremiah 19:4-5), indicating that child sacrifice was commonly practiced in the ancient world, including among the ancient Hebrews (2 Kings 3:27; Judges 11:30-40; Jeremiah 32:35; Mi-

cah 6:7). People would have ignored or denounced any prophet who opposed all sacrifices as absurd or satanic. I do not see animal sacrifices in the Hebrew Scriptures as God's ideal. I think that, more likely, they served as a necessary step in the process of ending all sacrifices. Consequently, I see the Levitical sacrificial code as compatible with a belief that God has concern for animals and finds all created animals "good" (Genesis 1:21).

As we will see, the later prophets frequently related God's concern for victims and God's opposition to sacrificial violence. However, the Book of Job challenges the notion that God always sided with victims.

Job

The Book of Job offers remarkable insight into the scapegoating process, as well as into the paradox that there is evil and suffering in a world made by God. Satan declared that God's loyal servant Job would curse God if Job lost his family, wealth, and health. God accepted the challenge, and Satan beset Job with a series of calamities. Job's predicament challenged the ancient Hebrew belief that God was both righteous and all-powerful. God allowed Satan to inflict misery on Job, which indicated that either God was not righteous or God was not all-powerful.

Job maintained that his treatment had been unjust. Meanwhile, Job's uncharitable friends asserted that Job must have somehow deserved his suffering. They told Job that he must have sinned against God, though Job knew otherwise.

Clearly, Job's "friends" treated him as a scapegoat. The sacred order had been violated in that an evidently righteous man had suffered grievous misfortunes. Rather than offer him the solace he needed, his friends cruelly accused him of wrongdoing, despite having no evidence to substantiate their claims. They needed to scapegoat Job to convince themselves that Job deserved such misery and that they, as good men, would be spared misfortune.

Job, convinced that he had been treated wrongfully, demanded an explanation from God. Job was determined to assert his innocence, even if doing so might prompt God to kill him (Job 13:15). God eventually responded to Job, but God never fully explained why Job had suffered. God asserted his power but did not contradict Job's claims of innocence and unjust treatment.¹⁵ Nevertheless, traditional translations

vindicate God by having Job “repent.” Jack Miles disputed the Revised Standard Version translation of Job 42:6,¹⁶ in which Job declared, “Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” While nearly all English Bibles have this or a similar translation, Job maintained his innocence throughout his ordeal. God failed to meet Job’s challenge to either demonstrate Job’s sin or admit that God had mistreated him. Therefore, it does not appear that Job needed to repent, and Miles pointed out that a reasonable translation of this passage does not describe Job’s repenting.¹⁷

If we accept the traditional translation, in which Job repented in the face of God’s grandeur and mystery, then we avoid the conclusion that God was guilty of wrongfully harming an innocent person. However, this approach raises a serious difficulty. We know that God had previously described Job as “a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8), and we know that Job was afflicted because God accepted Satan’s challenge. In other words, according to our notions of justice, Job was a victim of great injustice. If God’s justice required that Job repent, then it seems that our notions of justice would differ markedly from those of God. If that were the case, it seems that we would need to either admit that we have little insight into how we should behave and live, or we would be forced to reject God’s justice. If the former, there would be little, if anything, to prevent us from scapegoating because we could easily attribute our injustice to God’s will. If the latter, we would be inclined to reject the biblical description of God’s law, thereby diminishing greatly the relevance of Jewish and Christian faith.

Job’s response to God’s injustice suggests to us a third option, which preserves God’s relevance while avoiding scapegoating. It suggests that God’s justice (or perhaps we should say the ancient Hebrews’ understanding of God’s justice) evolved. Job rejected neither God nor his own sense of justice. He addressed God respectfully and did not, as his wife counseled (2:9), curse God. Job insisted on his innocence, and God evidently respected Job’s claim.¹⁸ Though God never admitted error, God did declare that Job had “spoken of me what is right” (42:7), gave Job “twice as much as he had before” (42:10), and denounced Job’s accusatory friends (42:7).

Although the story relates that God provided Job with new children and a fortune, Job likely continued to grieve for the children he had lost, and there was no way that God could fully compensate Job for the unjust physical and mental anguish. The Book of Job’s resolution

indicates that God, as described in the Hebrew Scriptures, was not always just. Indeed, there are stories in the Hebrew Scriptures in which God seemed to ordain unjust violence, destructiveness, and death. Perhaps God's justice changed over time.

An Evolving View of God

Similar to the myths of other religions, the Hebrews described God as favoring themselves and supporting their wars. Did God actually endorse violence and, if so, what does this say about God?

The stories of the Hebrews' conquest of the Promised Land seem to contradict the view that God desires love, compassion, peace, and justice. God instructed the Hebrews to drive out the inhabitants of the Promised Land so that the Hebrews would not "learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations" (Deuteronomy 18:9), such as child sacrifice, divination, and sorcery (Deuteronomy 18:9-12). God instructed the Hebrew to kill everyone and "you shall save alive nothing that breathes" (Deuteronomy 20:16). The various tribes inhabiting the Promised Land might have had erroneous beliefs and practices, but they were sincerely living according to their own faith traditions, and they were not choosing to act sinfully.

The Book of Joshua describes Joshua following these instructions and slaughtering all the inhabitants of Jericho (except Rahab and her family) (6:21), Ai (8:24-25), Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Gezer, Eg-lon, Hebron, Debir, and other lands (10:28-42). In another series of battles "All the spoil of these cities and the cattle, the people of Israel took for their booty; but every man they smote with the edge of the sword, until they had destroyed them, and they did not leave anything that breathed" (Joshua 11:14). Similarly, in the war against the Midianites, Moses instructed his commanders to kill everyone, including the male children, but to spare "all the young girls who have not known [a] man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves" (Numbers 31:18).

The violent behavior of the conquering Hebrews was not unusual at that time, but it does violate contemporary views of righteousness and justice. There are many other troubling stories, in which God orchestrates what modern readers would consider unjust violence. Elijah instructed the people to kill the prophets of Baal who, though mistaken in believing that their god could rain down fire, were earnest in their faith (1 Kings 18:40-41). Saul lost his favor with God, which eventu-

ally led to Saul's death, in part because he failed to carry out the divine order to kill all the people and animals in Amalek (Exodus 17:14; 1 Samuel 15:2-3). Saul had spared the Kenites, who lived among the Amalekites, who "showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt" (1 Samuel 15:6).

Do these violent stories indicate that God is tribal, favoring one group of people and having little regard for the rest of creation? Arguing against this theology, there are many biblical passages affirming that all creation belongs to God (Psalm 24:1; Isaiah 66:1-2; Colossians 1:16) and that God cares about all creation (e.g., Psalm 50:10-11; Job 38-39; Jonah 4:11; Matthew 6:26; Luke 12:6). The Scriptures instruct the Hebrews to show hospitality to strangers (Exodus 22:21, 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34), and there are many passages that describe God's eventual reign over all the nations of earth (Psalm 22:27; Isaiah 2:2-3, 11:9, 42:6, 61:11; Jeremiah 33:9; Revelation 21:1-4, 21:24). Importantly, a view of God as favoring a particular tribe makes the Jewish faith, upon which Christianity is grounded, resemble countless other religions that have claimed that their gods have endorsed their violence. There would be little reason to believe that the Hebrew account of the divine is any more valid than myriad other self-serving views.

Another explanation for God's evident sponsorship of violence against innocent victims is that God is not always just and good. This view could also account for God's role in Job's victimization, but it raises difficulties: If God is sometimes unjust, how do we know when God is being just? If we do not know, then it would seem that neither Jewish nor Christian faith is of much help in guiding our lives.

An approach that preserves the notion of God as good is to regard humanity's understanding about God's nature as evolving as humanity has matured. Perhaps the reason that the Bible depicts God endorsing violence is that the Bible, written by humans, reflects humans' views of God. In other words, the ancient Hebrews, eager to justify their violence against the inhabitants of land they coveted, attributed their own violence to God. Consequently, the God described by the Hebrew Scriptures is often violent and wrathful; the God of the later prophets tends to be much more concerned about mercy, compassion, and justice; and the God of the New Testament desires peaceful, loving communities. This view suggests that humanity's understanding of God's desires for Creation can evolve.

Violence in the Hebrew Scriptures: The Victim's Perspective

Violence is a central theme of the Hebrew Scriptures, and over 1000 passages discuss violence or threats of violence.¹⁹ Rarely, the Hebrew Scriptures describe God as violently destructive for no apparent reason. Uncommonly, there are stories in which God angrily takes out revenge for evildoing. Much more frequently, God hands over evildoers to violent humans, who do the punishing for God. Ezekiel 21:31 describes God's wrath against the Ammonites: "And I will pour out my indignation upon you; I will blow upon you with the fire of my wrath; and I will deliver you into the hands of brutal men, skillful to destroy." One might see this as divine retribution. However, one might reasonably conclude that these accounts, written by the ancient Hebrews, reflected a self-serving conviction that God shared their desire for vengeance and endorsed their violence.

It is remarkable that about 70 passages of the Hebrew Scriptures describe people punished by the effects of their own sinfulness.²⁰ The writer of Proverbs observed, "He who digs a pit will fall into it; and a stone will come back upon him who starts it rolling" (26:27), and "A man who is kind benefits himself, but a cruel man hurts himself" (11:17; see also Psalm 7:15-16). These passages indicate that violence ultimately hurts the perpetrator, and the New Testament expresses similar thoughts: "God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7).

Nonetheless, the ancient Hebrews often identified themselves as innocent victims, and about 100 of the 150 psalms relate anguish at being "despised" and "hated" by "numerous" and "deceitful" tormentors.²¹ The psalmist wrote, "More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause" (Psalm 69:4; see also John 15:25). In a passage Jesus would later recall (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34), the psalmist cried, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (22:1). This psalm then describes the writer as a victim of collective contempt and scapegoating: "But I am a worm, and no man; scorned by men, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads" (22:6-7).

Remarkably, the Hebrew Scriptures show a growing concern for victims in general, and many prophets identified the tragic plights of orphans, widows, and poor people. (See, for example, Deuteronomy 27:19; 1 Kings 17:20-21; Job 31:16-23; Isaiah 1:17, 1:23; Jeremi-

ah 22:3; Ezekiel 22:4-7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5). Perhaps the Hebrews' memories of slavery in Egypt made them sensitive to the predicament of victims.

Although the ancient Hebrews often understood and articulated the victim's perspective, they retained the universal human desire for vengeance. For example, the psalmist wrote, "O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall be he who requites you with what you have done to us! Happy shall be he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (Psalm 137:8-9). As with the Psalms, the Exodus account ambiguously seems to portray God as both a sponsor and an opponent of violence.

The Suffering Servant as Scapegoat

The account of the Suffering Servant illustrates the injustice of scapegoating.²² Isaiah introduced the Servant: "Behold my servant, whom I [God] uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, and he will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isaiah 42:1). The Servant would bring forth justice, but not in the traditional manner of primal religions that had regarded justice in terms of divinely sanctioned retributive violence. The justice brought by the Servant would involve revealing the scandal of scapegoating violence. Isaiah related, "I will give you [the Servant] as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49:6).

The text articulates scapegoating clearly. Isaiah 53:2-3 describes how the Servant is ugly and friendless – typical features of a scapegoat. Many cultures regard such people as cursed by the gods. When a crisis occurs, the mob often accuses such peripheral members of the community of violating sacred taboos, being possessed by demons, or of casting evil spells. Because scapegoats usually have few friends, people will generally not come to their defense. In the story of the Suffering Servant, the community attributed the Servant's pain, suffering, and death to God. In truth, the Servant suffered as a consequence of the people's sinfulness: "Yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities" (53:4-5).

Isaiah reinforced this message: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (53:6). Then, Isaiah reminded the Hebrew people

that the Servant was innocent: “he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth” (53:9). Unequivocally, the Servant was a victim and did not deserve the violence he received.

After acknowledging the Servant’s innocence, Isaiah said, “Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin” (53:10). It might appear that we should attribute the Servant’s misery to God, but Isaiah 42:2 reads, “He will faithfully bring forth justice.” The text indicates that the Servant chose to faithfully fulfill his destiny. According to this perspective, God did not perpetrate the suffering of the Servant. Instead, God desired to undermine the scapegoating process, even though doing so would likely result in harm to the Servant. As I will discuss, there are remarkable parallels to the New Testament Passion accounts.

The Later Prophets and Sacrifices

The Hebrew Scriptures describe the paradigm of using animals as scapegoats:

Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. . . The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land; and he shall let the goat go into the wilderness . . . (Leviticus 16:21).

There are two components for this prescription for sacrificial atonement for sins. First, the priest confesses the people’s sins, and then the priest transfers the sins onto a scapegoat. Micah similarly recognized that atonement requires the acknowledgment of sin. However, Micah asserted that God does not want sacrifices for sinfulness; instead, God desires righteousness:

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

(Micah 6:6-8).

This passage recalls the ancient tradition of human sacrifice, and it maintains that God does not want animal sacrifice either.

Other prophets expressed similar sentiments (Isaiah 1:11-13, 16-17; Amos 5:22-24). Proverbs 21:3 relates, “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice,” and there are other non-sacrificial passages, including 1 Samuel 15:22, Psalm 51:16-17; Isaiah 66:3, and Jeremiah 6:20 and 7:22-23. Jesus twice (Matthew 9:13, 12:7) echoed Hosea 6:6, which reads: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.” This rejection of animal sacrifices in favor of personal righteousness is a break from the Levitical sacrificial code. I think it reflects spiritual growth.

Monotheism Favors a God of Love

The monotheism embedded in the First Commandment (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7) was a radical departure from the polytheism that characterized other ancient religions. For one thing, monotheism made it more difficult for the ancient Hebrews to project their own desires and conflicts onto God. People believing in polytheism could envision their own mimetic rivalries and conflicts as having parallels in the mimetic rivalries and conflicts among the gods. With only one God, it was harder for the ancient Hebrews to defend bitter rivalries or vengeful sentiments by pointing to analogous squabbles among deities. Nonetheless, the ancient Hebrews’ monotheistic outlook did not guarantee an end to scapegoating because they still saw God as multifaceted. God could still be angry and jealous, as well as loving and compassionate.

Though the Hebrew Scriptures often describe God as wrathful, a recurrent theme is God’s love and concern for both the chosen Hebrew people and the rest of creation. (See, for example, Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 Chronicles 16:34; 2 Chronicles 6:14, 7:3; Ezra 3:11; Psalm 33:5, 100:5; Isaiah 63:7; Jeremiah 9:24; Lamentations 3:22.) The anti-sacrificial writings of the later prophets make the Hebrew Scriptures a satisfactory revelation of God’s desire to end scapegoating violence. Therefore, the New Testament is not needed for Jews

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to appreciate this view of God. An attribute of the New Testament is that, for non-Jews, Jesus' life and teachings and Paul's writings can help us understand the source of the scapegoating process and find ways to overcome it.

Chapter 3: The Life and Death of Jesus



In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, And the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:1-5).

Introduction

As in Genesis, John's creation account does not involve violence. John's Gospel continued, "He [John the Baptist] came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. . . The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world" (John 1:7, 9; see also Luke 2:32; John 1:4-5, 8:12, 9:5; 1 John 1:5). John wrote, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:19-20). Jesus would reveal that scapegoating is evil and hidden under the cloak of "sacred" sacrifice.

Jesus' Birth

The scapegoat is typically a peripheral member of the community, and Jesus' humble beginnings followed this pattern. His parents were neither wealthy nor powerful, and he was born in a manger. While his lineage (Matthew 1:2-16; Luke 3:23-38) included King David, there was nothing obvious or distinctive that would foretell his important mission. Indeed, Jesus told his disciples, "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing" (Matthew 21:42, see also Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17). In other

words, people would reject the one who would serve as the foundation of God's plan.

If Jesus had been a child of privilege, he would likely have engendered jealousy, a manifestation of mimetic rivalry. If a mob were to later kill such a person, it might have justified its violence on the grounds that the person was arrogant or did not deserve his privileged status. Or, the mob could have cited the sins of his wealthy parents, grandparents, or ancestors as excuses to kill him. For Jesus to expose the scandal of scapegoating violence, he needed to be clearly innocent. The Gospel birth stories describe Jesus as revered by the shepherds and the wise men because of his relationship with God, not because of any special position within human society.

John the Baptist

According to Christian tradition, Jesus was sinless from birth and did not need baptism for forgiveness of sins. His baptism by John was "to fulfil all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). When John the Baptist first saw Jesus, he exclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). What is the "sin of the world?" I think the sin of the world has been scapegoating. As long as there is scapegoating, there will be victimization and injustice. It is impossible to establish the realm of God "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10) if the community is grounded and maintained by scapegoating violence.

Many Christians have regarded the sin of the world as Adam and Eve's disobedience to God. However, their disobedience was an isolated event, which alone could not constitute the sin of the world, unless it somehow could be applied to everyone. Many contemporary Christians believe that, by an unclear mechanism, humanity has inherited Adam and Eve's sin, making the sin universal. I will consider difficulties of this theory in Chapter 13.

Why did John the Baptist proclaim Jesus the "Lamb of God"? Recall that those who engage in scapegoating have generally regarded their violence as sacred and the will of the divine. If Jesus had violently destroyed scapegoaters, then the formerly weak, victimized people would have assumed power. They would have quickly started to scapegoat because they too would have envisioned their violence as divine justice. The only way to dismantle the scapegoating process,

to take away the sin of the world, was to expose it as a falsehood. Jesus could not be violent and simultaneously reveal the scapegoating process – to violently oppose scapegoating in the name of God would be tantamount to replacing one form of sacred violence with another. Consequently, Jesus had to assume the role of the innocent scapegoat, symbolized by the lamb, himself.¹ By his own choice, he would fulfill what he believed was God's desire to expose the scapegoating process. This exposure would allow the possibility of reconciliation among victims and victimizers, which was impossible as long as humans, thinking that they were abiding by God's desires, participated in scapegoating.

Normally, people justify scapegoating by pointing to a misdeed by the victim. Given that all of us sin, it is usually easy to find an excuse to condemn the victim. However, the Gospels describe Jesus as sinless, so the Gospels unequivocally reveal Jesus as a victim.

John the Baptist was killed for shaming Herod and Herod's wife. What differentiated John the Baptist's martyrdom from that of Jesus and St. Stephen was that John the Baptist exhibited anger. Consequently, his death did not fully reveal the falsehood of scapegoating because people could blame his execution on an ill-tempered outburst.

Before Jesus could take away the sin of the world, he needed to directly confront and overcome those desires that derived from his human nature. He needed to show his followers that humans can transcend their own desires. Therefore, Jesus allowed Satan to tempt him with those desires that most strongly entice humans.

The Three Temptations

To dedicate himself totally to God, Jesus could not simply repress unwanted desires deep in his psyche, where they might emerge at any time and cripple his mission. Instead, he needed to confront fully and directly the greatest human temptations – the desire to satisfy one's biological cravings, the acquisitive mimetic desire for power and control, and the desire to feel immortal (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13).

In the desert, Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days. Satan (the nature of whom I will discuss in Chapter 8) tempted Jesus to abandon his focus on God and address his immediate bodily desire for food. However, Jesus rebuked Satan, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4; see also Luke 4:4).

Satan then appealed to the human desire for self-esteem by offering Jesus all the kingdoms he could see from a high mountain if he would worship Satan. The desire to be a king is an acquisitive mimetic desire because we frequently crave the power that others seem to enjoy. Remarkably, referring to all the kingdoms of the world, Satan said, “All these I will give you” (Matthew 4:9; see Luke 4:6). The New Testament does not deny that Satan owns these kingdoms, and indeed the satanic scapegoating process underlies all human kingdoms and other hierarchical power arrangements. Violence or the threat of violence characterizes kingdoms because an essential component of kingship is the ability of the king to impose his desires on others. Since Jesus would teach about serving others rather than being served, he rejected this temptation, declaring, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve’” (Matthew 4:10; Luke 4:8).

Third, Satan tempted Jesus to test God by jumping from a pinnacle of the Temple and forcing God to save him (Matthew 4:6-7; Luke 4:9-12). Doing this would address his human fear of death, but Jesus already had faith that God would protect him. Abiding by the biblical prohibition not to tempt God (Deuteronomy 6:16), he rejected Satan’s enticement.

The Bible describes Jesus as a leader and a hero, but his heroism is distinctive. Joseph Campbell has described the universal story of the hero, who leaves the community, goes into the wilderness, struggles against dangerous forces, and returns with new, divine knowledge.² The story of the three temptations fits this mold, but with an unusual twist. Unlike most such hero stories, Jesus’ struggle did not involve violence. Jesus did not physically overcome an external demon or a fierce beast, but rather he conquered those human fears and desires that have always led to the scapegoating process, resulting in victimization of vulnerable individuals. Jesus’ ministry would show a way that we too can transcend our potentially destructive desires. Indeed, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, referring to Jesus, wrote, “For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning” (4:15). If Jesus could not have been tempted, then he could not serve as a model for us as we struggle with our own temptations.

In Luke, the story concludes, “And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time” (4:13). When would this opportune time be? Jesus was most vulnerable when he was tempted to avoid arrest, prosecution, and crucifixion. Jesus,

in rejecting the three temptations in the desert, was now prepared to teach God's message, even to the point of death. But being human, he often faced temptation just as we face temptation throughout our lives. Indeed, the Lord's Prayer includes the request to "lead us not into temptation" (Matthew 6:13; Luke 11:4).

James understood and articulated well the dangers of yielding to temptations aroused by acquisitive mimetic desire. He wrote:

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:14-18).

In what I consider a beautiful articulation of Girardian mimetic theory, James continued, "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war" (James 4:1-2). The solution, as James understood, is to focus on God: "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8).

Importantly, the three temptations story teaches that not all mimetic desires are bad. Jesus chose to derive his mimetic desires from God, not humans. It is fortunate that we do not need to reject mimetic desires altogether because, after our fundamental biological needs are met, we cannot avoid having such desires. Central to Christian faith is taking Jesus, rather than other people, as our model.

Another significant implication of the three temptations story is that Jesus only rejected the temptations; he did not destroy the tempter. If we focus on destroying an external Satan, we will be less inclined to recognize our own satanic desires and more inclined to scapegoat others we regard as "possessed" by Satan.

The Passion Story Describes Scapegoating Violence

After teaching and healing in many communities, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt amid an adoring crowd (Matthew 21:7-11; Mark 11:7-11; Luke 19:35-36). Traditionally, a conquering king rode a horse that symbolized power. Instead, Jesus rode on a colt, which showed humility and fulfilled the prophecy: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt . . . and he shall command peace to the nations” (Zechariah 9:9-10). One way that Jesus commanded peace was to disrupt the violent Temple sacrifices by turning over the money changers’ tables (Matthew 21:12; Mark 11:15) and driving out the animals slated for sacrifice (John 2:15). The angered chief priests and scribes sought to kill Jesus, but they refrained from arresting him in public because the crowd admired him (Mark 11:18; Luke 19:48).

According to Girard, sacrifices memorialized the original scapegoating violence that generated the community. Remarkably, at the Last Supper, Jesus initiated a new sacrament that did not involve sacrificing any victims. Holy Communion is designed to bring people closer to each other and to God. However, in using bread and wine, Holy Communion does not require killing anyone. I think this dramatizes Jesus’ rejection of sacrificial, scapegoating violence. However, some have argued that blood sacrifices ended because Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, ended the need for sacrifices to atone for human sinfulness. There are difficulties with this theology, which I discuss in Chapter 13.

What about the doctrine of transubstantiation, which sees the bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Christ? Transubstantiation posits a mystical transformation and does not involve perpetrating acts of violence against anyone.

Jesus did not avoid becoming a victim of violence. After the Last Supper, he prayed at the Mount of Olives, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt” (Mark 14:36; see also Matthew 26:39-44; Luke 22:42). Jesus prayed that he would not need to experience suffering and death, but he recognized this was his destiny.

Did God desire Jesus’ death? I do not think so. I think God desired for Jesus to show how to build communities based on love rather than on scapegoating violence. Unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, Jesus’ ministry offended many people whose position, power, or sense of order was grounded on the scapegoating process. Jesus’ dedica-

tion to his destiny put him at great risk of becoming a victim of the scapegoating process. By becoming a victim, he exposed clearly and unequivocally that scapegoating is unjust.

The Passion: An Anthropological Look

During the Passion, Jesus assumed the status of the scapegoat victim, which was a pivotal move in revealing the scapegoating process. Jesus told Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the province of Judea who presided over Jesus' trial and ordered his crucifixion, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (John 18:37). Among the truths revealed by the Passion story is an anthropological understanding of the scapegoating process. Throngs in Jerusalem greeted Jesus with "Hosanna!" with mimetic enthusiasm. A few days later, throngs shouted, "Crucify him!" with mimetic accusatory shouts and jeers.

The means by which the authorities sought to condemn Jesus reveals much about the scapegoating process. Prior to Jesus' arrest, the chief priests and Pharisees deliberated on what to do with him (John 11:47). They acknowledged that Jesus "performs many signs," but they feared that the excitement surrounding Jesus might inspire revolt, which could be disastrous for the entire Jewish community. Caiaphas advised that they use Jesus as a scapegoat: "Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all; You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than have the whole nation destroyed' " (John 11:49-50). This is the logic of sacrifice – that one person or a few individuals should die in order to maintain or restore order and peace. Ancient people, not having the benefit of modern psychology and anthropology, did not understand the scapegoating process; and Caiaphas correctly observed that people did not understand how the death of one man could prevent widespread destruction. Scapegoating can be economical in the short term because it generally requires few victims to prevent widespread outbreaks of violence; but it is costly in the long term because victims are repeatedly needed. Regardless of the number of victims, scapegoating is always abhorrent because it is unjust.

Luke's Gospel further reveals the scapegoating process, relating that after the Crucifixion, "Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each

other” (23:12). The reason they became friends evidently relates to their common need to maintain order. During the Passover, a holiday that celebrates the Hebrews’ liberation from enslavement in Egypt, there was often agitation against Roman rule. Many Jews sought a Messiah who could free them from the yoke of Roman occupation. Many hoped that Jesus, who spoke with wisdom and performed miracles, would liberate them; and, as authorities, Herod and Pilate were probably worried that Jesus might lead a revolt. Interestingly, Pilate did not find fault with Jesus, but Herod was angered when Jesus did not answer Herod’s questions. How did Jesus’ execution bring two rivals together, particularly when they disagreed on Jesus’ guilt? Perhaps the reason is that their roles in Jesus’ trial and later execution were mutually beneficial and complementary: Herod declared Jesus guilty, and Pilate presided over the execution.

What would have happened if the high priests had not requested Jesus’ arrest, or if Judas had not betrayed Jesus, or if the Roman authorities had not chosen to condemn Jesus to crucifixion, or if the mob had chosen to release Jesus rather than Barabbas? If the various participants in the story had acted differently, would Jesus have been spared, and would the Passion, which contemporary Christians regard as an essential part of Christianity, not have happened? Perhaps God directed the actions resulting in the Crucifixion, much like a chess player moving the pieces. However, in this case, the Passion story would be like a fictional novel in which God was the author. The only difference would be that God made a real innocent person suffer and die.

Do people have free will, in which case it would seem that Jesus might have survived the ordeal in Jerusalem? Or, are people pawns of God’s machinations, in which case we might question God’s justice and goodness? Girardian theory offers an answer to this paradox. Perhaps the Crucifixion was predictable but not inevitable. Jesus generated a crisis by openly violating a wide range of taboos, most notably taboos that held women, poor people, and infirm people in inferior positions. Jesus also challenged the authority of the priests and scribes. Perhaps most provocatively, he threatened the entire sacred order when he undermined the Temple sacrificial cult by turning over the money changers’ tables and liberating the animals (John 2:15). Jesus’ defiance of the sacred order sparked public agitation and threatened to foment communal discord, which made his arrest and crucifixion very likely.

The Passion: Anti-Semitism

A cursory look at history reveals that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have not stopped Christians from participating in scapegoating. The victims have included people of color, women, homosexuals, people of differing faiths, fellow Christians who have not shared the particular Christian theology of those in power, and animals. Ironically, the Passion, which revealed the scandal of scapegoating, has been an impetus for scapegoating. Many Jews have suffered ostracism or violence because Christians have blamed them for Jesus' death.³

Those Christians who have scapegoated Jews have evidently overlooked the fact that Jesus and his first followers, including his disciples, were Jewish. Neither Jesus nor his followers rejected Judaism; instead, they advanced a theology grounded in Judaism. Indeed, it is not surprising that Jesus' ministry found fertile ground among Jews. Judaism had made great progress in the difficult task of revealing the scapegoating process, perhaps exemplified best by the Songs of the Suffering Servant and the writings of several later prophets (see Chapter 2).

A passage that has often been used to justify anti-Semitism is Jesus' declaration, as he carried the cross on his back:

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck!' (Luke 23:28-29)

Commentators have opined that Jesus was specifically predicting the disastrous Jewish revolt of 66-73 C.E., which resulted in the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and the massacre and enslavement of a large number of Jewish people. Indeed, Luke's initial readers likely associated Jesus' declaration with this revolt because scholars generally agree that Luke was written after the destruction of the Temple.

Gil Bailie has observed, "The crucifixion's anthropological significance is lost if responsibility for its violence is shifted from all to some."⁴ In other words, to the degree that Christians attribute the Crucifixion to "the Jews" or to anyone else, the Crucifixion fails to reveal the universal scapegoating process.

The Resurrection Story Asserts Jesus' Innocence

An important aspect of the Resurrection story is that it unequivocally revealed that Jesus was an innocent victim of manipulative leaders and a deluded mob. In contrast, typical primal myths describe victims as guilty of sowing chaos, casting spells, or violating taboos.⁵

The Bible relates that everyone turned against Jesus. The Roman authorities considered Jesus a troublemaker who threatened the peace, and the Jewish authorities charged that he had blasphemed against the faith by claiming to be the Messiah. The mob, angered that he had failed to liberate them from Roman rule, cried, "Crucify him!" Even his disciples abandoned him. Those who participated in Jesus' crucifixion – believing that he deserved an ignominious, painful death – would not expect him to be resurrected and to join God in heaven. The Bible, by relating Jesus' resurrection, demonstrates that the Roman and Jewish authorities and the mob were all wrong about Jesus' guilt. He was innocent, and they had participated in his murder.

The Gospels emphasize Jesus' innocence in many ways. Judas, returning the silver reward for betraying Jesus, said, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood"; and then Judas hung himself (Matthew 27:3-5). As the Jewish council sought to turn Jesus over to the Romans, "The chief priests and the whole council sought testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, and their witness did not agree." (Mark 14:55-56). Pilate (Luke 23:4), the fellow condemned criminal (Luke 23:40-43), and the centurion (Luke 23:47) all asserted Jesus' innocence. Evidently, the mob similarly recognized that an innocent man had been killed: "And all the multitudes who assembled to see the sight, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts" (Luke 23:48). Finally, Mark's Gospel describes Jesus raised and seated "at the right hand of God" (16:19), which would only happen if Jesus were innocent.

Eternal Truths Revealed through the Resurrection

For many Christians, believing in the Resurrection is a prerequisite for calling oneself Christian. However, many people, particularly in this scientifically oriented age, find it hard to believe that the Resurrection really happened. Meanwhile, a careful comparison of

the resurrection stories in the Gospels demonstrates numerous inconsistencies that appear irreconcilable.⁶ If the Gospels have inaccuracies about details of the Resurrection, perhaps the Gospels are wrong about the historical validity of the Resurrection itself.

There is no way to prove whether the Resurrection actually happened. However, concern about its proof misses the point about faith in the Resurrection. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In terms of Christian faith, two important questions do not depend on the historical accuracy of the biblical Resurrection accounts. What does it mean for people to experience the Resurrection, and what do the Gospel resurrection stories tell us about Jesus?

The early Christians experienced the risen Christ as a presence in their lives that transformed their natural human fixation on death to a celebration of life.⁷ They no longer feared death at the hands of Roman or other authorities, and they were inspired to courageously spread the good news that Jesus had changed their lives. From this perspective, the Gospel resurrection accounts reflect how these early Christians were spiritually transformed by Jesus’ ministry, and they experienced a relationship with what they perceived as the risen Christ. The disciples and other early Christians experienced belief in the risen Christ as a spiritual transformation, and so can we. For example, we can gain faith that God is about life and not death. One implication is that this faith helps relieve anxieties about mortality. Whatever happens to our soul or “self” – our sense of unique identity that we carry throughout our lives – is not bad. Many fear that God will punish us for our sins by condemning us to a horrible afterlife or perhaps no afterlife at all. This fear encourages us to try to prove our worth by scapegoating – transferring our sense of guilt to vulnerable individuals. To the degree that we have faith in some kind of benevolent afterlife, we are less inclined to try to transfer our guilt – and the punishment that we believe should accompany guilt – to others.

People often have a strong desire for vengeance, but upon returning after the Resurrection, Jesus did not punish those who had wronged him. He did not condemn his disciples. He greeted them in love and friendship saying, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19). In doing so, he participated in reconciliation, not an endless cycle of mimetic recrimination, accusation, and violence.

Religions Have Similar Origin Stories

In the nineteenth century, anthropologists discovered that throughout the world, primal religions were telling remarkably similar origin stories. Typically, these stories described a crisis, a killing, and then peace and reconciliation. Because the end of each crisis seemed miraculous, many myths have described the resurrection of murdered victims and their transformation into gods.⁸

Influenced by Enlightenment thought, which tended to view Christianity as mere superstition, many nineteenth-century thinkers concluded that anthropology had confirmed their skepticism about Christianity's stories. Christianity does indeed have the same structure as many primal myths: a crisis, a killing, a resurrection, communal reconciliation, and deification of the murdered victim. However, Christianity's story is distinctive in that it describes the victim as innocent. The community comes together because of a common belief that they should follow Jesus, not because they have destroyed the evil in their midst.

Jesus taught that we should love each other. The Bible provides two main approaches for communal cohesion grounded in love. One involves explicit instructions, such as the Sermon on the Mount. The other involves demonstration, and the Bible relates how Jesus showed love through his life, death, and resurrection.

Chapter 4: Jesus as Teacher



Blessed Are the Meek

Jesus was a Jew who upheld the Jewish law. He said, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matthew 5:17). Evidently, Jesus sought to fulfill the vision of the later prophets, who opposed sacrificial violence. One way he did this was to teach people how to avoid acquisitive mimetic desires.

In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11; Luke 6:20-22), Jesus declared, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). How can this happen? Are not meek individuals, human and animal, regularly abused? Jesus assured those who were downtrodden that they would prevail and that their woes would abate. However, it is not clear how this would happen. Most likely, some listeners anticipated God handing them the reins of power. This accorded with traditional notions of justice, in which people eventually get the satisfaction of vengeance. Indeed, Jesus’ claim that the meek will inherit the earth has inspired some Christians to violently overthrow their oppressors.

Revolutionary violence, however, merely substitutes the perceived righteous violence of one group, that of powerful rulers, with the perceived righteous violence of another group, that of the formerly meek who have obtained power. I do not think Jesus was trying to tell the meek that one day they would have political power. Rather, he was teaching that faithfulness and love will eventually prevail.

Jesus said, “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14), indicating that his followers would succeed by discipleship. He said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). In other words, in the Beatitudes, inheriting the earth involves a moral and spiritual transformation, not a political one.

Jesus emphasized that followers should be nonviolent in thought and action. He stated, “You have heard that it was said to the men of old,

‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:21-22). Jesus continued (Matthew 5:23-24) that one must reconcile with one’s brother even before offering a gift at the altar, an indication that making peace is more important than religious observance. Without reconciliation, Jesus explained, conflicts escalate; and such conflicts could result in accusations, court proceedings, and imprisonment (Matthew 5:25).

Blessed Are the Poor

In first century Palestine, people regarded poverty, sickness, or disfigurement as signs of divine judgment. People believed that misfortune reflected punishment for one’s own sins or the sins of one’s ancestors. It is easy to see the scapegoating process at work here – mistreating impoverished, infirm, or other marginal members of society, who are the typical scapegoat victims, complemented punishment by God.

Again, Jesus inverted common beliefs. He said, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20; see Matthew 5:3). As we will explore in Chapter 12, I do not think we should regard the kingdom of God (also known as the “realm of God”) as an otherworldly place where poor people enjoy paradise and rich people are miserable. I see the realm of God as a state of harmony and peace among all God’s creation. Such a view would have made sense to Jesus’ first century Jewish audience, who would not have denigrated God’s earthly creation in favor of an otherworldly paradise. I think Jesus was teaching that those who covet wealth disconnect themselves from the rest of humanity and from God’s love. As long as poor people avoid the common mistake of coveting wealth and becoming envious and resentful of richer people, they will find it easier than wealthy people to develop genuine and honest interpersonal relationships and to interact peacefully with God’s creation.

For rich people to gain self-esteem through wealth, it is crucial that poorer people envy them. Rich and poor are relative terms, and poor people of one community might have more material wealth than rich people of another. From a mimetic rivalry standpoint, what matters most is how much one has in relation to one’s neighbors, not how much material wealth one has. Consequently, rich people tend to flaunt their

wealth to generate envy, which validates their success; however, envy can lead to humiliation, resentment, and violence.

Rich people protect their property with police and military forces. What do wealthy people do when anger and resentment among poor people grow to the point that poor people threaten to revolt or, in democracies, demand heavy taxation of wealthy people? Typically, wealthy people try to shift the focus of the anger and resentment onto one or more scapegoats, claiming that the social unrest is due to the activities of evil people, such as communists, “elitist” intellectuals, or sexual “deviants.”

To the degree that people victimize other individuals, whether humans or nonhumans, they become less connected to the rest of creation, making them feel more alone in a mysterious, often terrifying universe. I think this is why Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:23). Similarly, the writer of Ecclesiastes observed that it is vain to think that striving for personal gain situates people better in the universe because every living thing shares the same fate of death (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3; 3:19). Jesus said, “Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24).

Marked disparity in wealth divides communities and harms everyone. While Jesus was concerned about the plight of poor people (Matthew 19:21, 26:9; Luke 4:18, 14:13), they were blessed to be free of the corrupting effects of wealth. Nevertheless, they were not immune to divisive mimetic rivalries, and they could only receive the blessing Jesus declared in the Beatitudes by loving each other (John 13:34).

Blessed Are You That Weep

Why did Jesus say “Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh” (Luke 6:21)? Perhaps one reason is that happiness and grief are related. It is through deprivation and loss that we come to appreciate the blessings we cherish. Further, our remembering that life always involves suffering can help us accept our own suffering with patience and perseverance.

This teaching conveys another truth: Our lives are often restricted and inauthentic because we spend much of our time and effort trying to avoid suffering. Indeed, if we take risks that arise when we live according to our beliefs, values, and goals, our suffering can sometimes

increase. Nevertheless, our greatest joys often derive from accomplishments that reflect our deepest convictions. Therefore, if we are willing to risk the possibility of weeping, we can also experience great joy.

For example, many of us who mourn animal suffering and death sometimes wish we were not so sensitive to and empathetic with animals. However, the same empathy that causes us to mourn for animals also opens us to the possibility of experiencing joy in our relationships with animals and in knowing that we are helping those who need us. Although our sadness can give way to a sense of despair, Christianity offers a message of hope. We may imagine the realm of God envisioned by Isaiah (11:6-9), in which all creatures will live peacefully together.

Blessed Are the Peacemakers

Violent people almost always believe that their actions are justified, and violent resistance to their activities only heightens their sense of self-righteousness. However, Jesus said, “All who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). The only way to stop the cycle of escalating violence is to be a peacemaker.

Jesus’ instructions deviated from traditional teachings. Remarkably, he told his listeners (Matthew 5:38) not to follow the ancient Hebrew “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” rule (Exodus 21:24). The human tendency has been to respond to violence with even greater violence, and the Hebrew instruction for equal retribution might have helped limit mimetic violence. However, Jesus taught that reciprocal violence was not God’s ideal. Instead, Jesus advised, “Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:39; see also Luke 6:29).

Along this vein, Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44; see also Luke 6:27), but this can be exceptionally difficult. How can we love those who have wounded us badly, or who continue to hurt us or our loved ones? Jesus offered some helpful guidance by showing us that love is primarily about actions, not feelings. The Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:30-35) shows how love involves actively helping those in need. When trying to explain the concept of the “kingdom (or realm) of God” with parables, Jesus described mutually beneficial relationships or people engaged in righteous activities (Matthew 13:31-52, 18:23-35, 20:1-16, 25:1-13; Mark 4:26-29; Luke 13:18-21). Loving our enemies, then, is something to do

rather than something to feel.

One difficulty is that we humans hardly ever regard our violence as violence per se, but as “defense” or “justice.” Our desire for self-justification is strong, particularly when we crave revenge against those who have hurt us or damaged our self-esteem. The Bible records God saying “Vengeance is mine” (Deuteronomy 32:35), and it is tempting to expedite God’s justice by taking vengeance on those who we believe have wronged us. However, the declaration “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Romans 12:19) indicates that vengeance is the proper province of God, not people. Of course, God can repay any way God chooses, which allows us to consider the possibility that God does not want vengeance at all.

Does peacemaking apply to animals? I am convinced that avoiding cruelty to animals and attending to those in need are essential components of peacemaking. Indeed, the Hebrew Scriptures encourage animal welfare (Deuteronomy 22:10, 25:4; Psalm 145:9; Proverbs 12:10), and they mandate that one must rescue an animal on the Sabbath, even if the animal belongs to one’s enemy (Exodus 23:4-5). In order for peacemaking to be effective and meaningful, it must be a way of life, not something that one does only when it is convenient. Anytime we close our hearts and minds to the suffering of victims, whether human or nonhumans, we become more accustomed to tolerating injustice. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

The Great Commandment

When asked which is the greatest commandment in the law (Matthew 22:36), Jesus said,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37-40; see also Mark 12:29-31).

Jesus’ reply recalls Leviticus 19:18, which reads: “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” While the Hebrew

passage regards “neighbor” as belonging to one’s own people, Jesus universalized the Judaic law. When asked who is a neighbor, Jesus gave the example of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37).

Today, people generally regard all fellow humans as neighbors worthy of our respect and concern, and many people similarly care about certain animals, such as dogs, cats, and horses. Should we regard all animals as neighbors? To be sure, many animals can be good neighbors to us, befriending and protecting us. Should we, likewise, befriend and protect animals? The Bible indicates that we should, in part because we all have received the spark of life from God. Job said, “In his [God’s] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12:10).

The Bible teaches that God cares about animals, and the psalmist wrote, “Man and beast thou savest, O Lord” (36:6; see also 24:1 and 50:10-11). God saved Nineveh on behalf of its cattle, as well as its people (Jonah 4:11). Indeed, the Bible has numerous passages calling for humane treatment of animals.¹

Job asserted that all animals manifest God’s love and concern:

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?” (Job 12:7-9).

One reason that God created animals, according to this passage, is that the miracle and diversity of life demonstrates God’s creative goodness (see Job 39).

Genesis 1:31 describes God reviewing all creation and declaring it “very good.” After the Flood, the Bible relates God’s covenant with all creation, including the animals, to not flood the earth again. According to the Bible, in God’s eyes humans and animals constitute one community. Mark’s Gospel reads, “And he [Jesus] said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation’ (16:15), and the psalmist wrote, “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!” (150:6; see also Revelation 5:13).

Christianity teaches that God cares about all creatures (Matthew 10:29; Luke 12:6), and the science of ecology has shown how living beings depend on each other. When humans abuse animals rather than regard them as their neighbors, they put humanity at risk.

Parables

One of Christianity's distinctive features is that Jesus often taught with parables. Matthew's Gospel relates, "All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable." (Matthew 13:34). Parables lend themselves to diverse interpretations, which is one reason that Christians hold such a wide range of theologies despite sharing a common text. Why did Jesus rely so heavily on parables?

Reading the Bible through the lens of the scapegoating process yields an explanation. If, as Girard has asserted, the scapegoating process is the foundation of human culture, people would have great difficulty appreciating how the scapegoating process pervades all knowledge, including language itself. If Jesus had spoken directly and had tried to explain how everyone participates in scapegoating, he would likely have been ignored, ridiculed, or possibly accused of demonic possession and killed.

Those who talk about the gods demanding sacrifices do not need to talk in parables because the language of sacred violence is a language people have always understood. In contrast, Jesus provided a wide range of stories with surprise endings and obscure sayings. This would encourage people to think in new ways and avoid the immediate resistance that accompanies direct challenges to their myths, rituals, and taboos. In this way, they might see that "what has been hidden since the foundation of the world" (Matthew 13:35) is that scapegoating is the sin that creates and maintains communities. Jesus said, "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matthew 13:13).

Some Questions Raised by Teaching in Parables

If it is true that people tend to reject those who, with a prophetic voice, have revealed the injustice of scapegoating, how did anti-sacrificial teachings by some of the prophets become part of the Hebrew Scriptures? Perhaps the ancient Hebrews were starting to recognize the injustice of the scapegoating process, in which case these writings resonated with them.

What did Matthew mean when he said that Jesus spoke in parables "to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet" (Matthew 13:35)? This relates to Psalm 78, in which the prophet Asaph wrote, "I will open my

mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us” (2-3). He described God’s anger at the Hebrews’ lack of faith after the Exodus from Egypt when they lived in the wilderness. The Hebrews experienced extensive violence and deaths, which Asaph attributed to God. According to Asaph, the people’s craving for flesh so angered God that God “slew the strongest of them, and laid low the picked men of Israel” (78:31). This likely relates to Numbers 11:31-33, in which the Hebrews in the desert craved meat, even though there was plenty of manna. God provided abundant quail, and “While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord smote the people with a very great plague” (11:33).

How can we recognize our own scapegoating? People have always found it easy to recognize when other people scapegoat. It is much more difficult to identify our own scapegoating because we tend to regard our own violence as righteous and just. One way to avoid participating in scapegoating is to listen to the victims. We tend to resist hearing victims’ accounts because doing so might make us aware of our personal failings and our own contributions to the strife that plagues our communities. It is easier to look upon past generations and condemn their victimization (e.g., America’s crimes against Native Americans) than to recognize and acknowledge contemporary scapegoating (e.g., crimes against animals). Another way to avoid scapegoating is to remain mindful that it happens. If we find that our anger is growing, we must step back, remain as detached as possible, and assess the situation. An excellent strategy is to mentally take the perspective of those with whom we are angry and ask, “How would they describe the situation? How would they defend their actions?”

If Christianity has revealed the scapegoating process, why have Christians so often participated in scapegoating, such as against people of color, indigenous peoples, homosexuals, and animals? Christians tend to find scapegoating attractive for the same or similar reasons as non-Christians. However, Christian faith offers ways to resist scapegoating’s appeal. For insight, we will look at several parables.

Parable of the Weeds

In the parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30), a servant informs his master that an enemy has sown weeds among his wheat. The master orders them not to pull up the weeds immediately, “lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest” (Matthew 13:29-30).

This parable reveals much about the scapegoating process.² People have always sought to identify evil and destroy it. In an intense desire to eradicate that evil, communities accuse and kill many innocent individuals. The parable of the weeds instructs us to resist the temptation to try to destroy anything that might be evil. Otherwise, the evil we do to ourselves can far outweigh the evil wrought by our perceived enemies.

This describes what often happens when people try to eradicate animals regarded as “pests.” The balance seen in nature does not accord with humanity’s limitless acquisitive desires. Consequently, farmers often try to kill those creatures who reduce farmland productivity or who threaten livestock. Reducing the population of targeted species often has unpredictable consequences, many of which have proven harmful to humans and to the rest of creation.

Parable of the Lost Sheep

In the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7), the good shepherd leaves 99 sheep unattended until he finds the one who was lost. A Girardian reading suggests that this parable teaches that we should not sacrifice one individual to protect the rest of the community. But if we were to renounce scapegoating, we would risk losing its unifying effects because scapegoating does help restore peace and order during times of crisis. In other words, like the shepherd who risks the flock to save one sheep, Jesus taught that we should not sacrifice a single, innocent individual, even if the sacrifice would benefit the larger community.³

Parable of the Prodigal Son

From a Girardian perspective, the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) encourages forgiveness, even if doing so sacrifices one’s own status

and well-being. The story begins with the younger son asking for his inheritance. The father divides his property between his two sons. Both sons show little concern or respect for their father, and both regard their father's property as their own possessions. They lack the love and compassion that should bind families, and consequently it is not surprising that later the older brother would find no room in his heart to forgive his younger brother's sins. Instead, the older brother would be self-centered, self-righteous, and judgmental.

The younger son takes his inheritance and squanders it. When he returns, humiliated and destitute, his father does not condemn him. Rather, the father runs to the son, embraces him, and welcomes him back to the family with a grand party. The father also lovingly forgives his older son who had just berated the father for welcoming back the prodigal son. The father gently explains the rationale for celebrating the younger son's return and reminds the older son, "All that is mine is yours." The logic of the scapegoating process is to identify and embrace a "good" son and reject a "bad" son. Instead, the father shows love for both sons despite their flaws.

"I Have Not Come to Bring Peace, but a Sword"

Even though the parable of the prodigal son features familial reconciliation, Jesus also had this to say:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:34-37).

Social discord was an initial, inevitable consequence – but not the goal – of Jesus' ministry. He opposed the hierarchical social order that unjustly marginalized members of society, such as those who were poor, widowed, or infirm. Because the social order helped maintain peace, Jesus' ministry threatened to disrupt all levels of society, including the most fundamental social unit: the family. However, the Bible teaches that our communities are not peaceful or reconciled as long as they adhere to social customs, laws, and unjust social arrangements that arise

from the scapegoating process. It is striking that the parallel passage to Matthew 10:34-37 in Luke includes “Henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three” (12:52). The scapegoating mentality is all against one, with people unified by their hatred of the scapegoat. In contrast, Jesus’ ministry threatened to lead to destabilizing conflicts, such as three-against-two conflicts that would be difficult to resolve and could tear families and other social units apart.

Just communities reject scapegoating as the glue that holds them together. When culturally defined relationships become stumbling blocks to reconciliation, we must be ready to establish new kinds of relationships. However, deviating from social standards violates taboos. This can be dangerous and requires courage and faith. I will start to discuss Christian faith next.

Chapter 5: Some Thoughts about Jesus



The prophet Isaiah envisioned a time when

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:6, 9; see also 65:25).

What Is the Knowledge of the Lord?

Girard argued that central to human knowledge is the intuitive understanding that scapegoating generates communal cohesiveness.¹ Humans have often predicated their violence on the grounds that angry deities have demanded punishment of those individuals held responsible for crises, and subsequent sacrifices have become necessary to appease the gods. Importantly, the Bible describes a gradual awakening to the view that God does not want violence. God cares about all creation, and the psalmist wrote, “The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made” (145:9).

I think that if we follow Paul’s advice to “be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Ephesians 5:1), we will be gaining “the knowledge of the Lord.” This knowledge involves people grounding their mimetic desires on God’s desires rather than on each other’s desires. With this knowledge, we can help reconcile all creation to the peaceful coexistence that Isaiah 11:6-9 describes. Paul wrote, “The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now . . . as we wait for adoption as sons” (Romans 8:19-23). The adopted “sons”² will have the knowledge of God, and they will be instruments of peace. “The creation waits with eager longing” accords with Jesus’ charge to his disciples, “Go into all

the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15; or “to every creature” [King James Version]). The Bible describes God’s ideal as a world in which all creatures glorify God and live harmoniously with each other.

While Isaiah prophesied a peaceful end time, the peace that Jesus offered for those struggling in a harsh, judgmental, and often violent world was different. Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). Jesus did not offer the peace in the worldly sense of being free from strife and danger. I think Jesus offered a sense of inner peace that helps quell the deepest fears in the human soul – fears related to isolation, damaged self-esteem, and mortality. The biblical insight is that we can gain a sense of peace by aligning our desires with those of God.

How can we ascertain God’s desires, given that many of us find God distant and clouded in mystery? Christians regard Jesus as their model because Christians believe that God was his model. Jesus taught that it is possible to love everyone and avoid victimizing anyone. In showing this path, many Christians believe, Jesus took the role of the “little child” described in Isaiah 11:6, who leads all creation toward peace and harmony.

Does one need to be versed in Girardian mimetic theory in order to comprehend the knowledge of the Lord? No. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus simply said, “Follow me”. He advised his disciples to imitate him, which is easy for mimetic creatures such as ourselves. He assured his followers, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30), but Christians today still struggle to understand how this can be so. Christians who genuinely try to follow Jesus often suffer from misfortune or violence. It takes great faith to believe that Jesus’ path of love and peace will result in a sense of inner peace and well-being as well as communal harmony. Lack of such faith, I think, largely explains why Christians throughout the ages have so often engaged in violence and destructiveness.

Is Jesus the Only Way?

The Bible describes many non-Jews and non-Christians as righteous, such as Job, Ruth, and the centurion who declared Jesus innocent (Luke 23:47). Nevertheless, John 14:6 reads, “I am the way, and the truth, and

the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.” Largely on account of this passage, many Christians believe that only Christians can “come to the Father.” However, if this were the case, children of Christian parents would have an unfair advantage, and non-Christians who had lived righteously would nonetheless be alienated from God. I think that putting John 14:6 into context offers insight.

Jesus was talking to Jews, many of whom were focused on the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law. He aimed to reform Judaism to its original intent, which included serving God by reflecting God’s love for all creation. For this audience, perhaps following Jesus was the only way to fully understand what Jesus understood to be God’s intentions.

Those Christians trying to spread the gospel should be mindful that, when they show love and compassion, their activities encourage non-Christians to consider the faith. However, it in no way lessens the validity or importance of Christian teachings to acknowledge the possibility that non-Jews and non-Christians in other places and times have acquired “the knowledge of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:9, 65:25). People with different cultural traditions might find Jesus’ stories and metaphors difficult to understand.

Christianity’s survival and growth have been historical phenomena. The stories about Jesus could have died out, joining countless other religious movements. The disciples could have failed to convince people to follow Jesus, or Christians could have abandoned the faith rather than face persecution at the hands of the Romans. Given the wide range of Christian beliefs and practices in the first two centuries after Jesus’ death, it is also possible that a Christianity very different from what we have today could have prevailed. If this had happened, Christianity’s holy text would likely have included many of the books and letters that were once condemned and destroyed as heretical, and it would likely have omitted writings that Christians cherish, or struggle with, today. If the movement inspired by Jesus had died out, or if it had been altered so much as to be practically unrecognizable compared to Jesus’ actual ministry, would the world have been deprived of Jesus’ teachings? If one believes, as the Bible relates, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16), it seems reasonable also to believe that God would give the world the Son as many times as needed to reveal “the knowledge of the Lord.”

Was Jesus Divine? Implications for Christian Living

According to Christian tradition, Jesus had both a human and a divine nature. Jesus said, “The Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:38). Jesus’ rivalry-free relationship with God has been a model for human relationships with each other. Girard has termed Jesus’ striving to mimic the Father as “good mimesis,” and Christians are similarly called to good mimesis, with Jesus as our model.

Recalling chapter 3, which discusses Jesus rejecting the three temptations, the Bible teaches that we, like Jesus, have the ability to renounce our own acquisitive mimetic desires and to dedicate ourselves to God. Like Jesus, we have a divine nature. He said, “Is it not written in your law [Psalm 82:6], ‘I said, you are gods’?” (John 10:34).

To assert that everyone, including Jesus, has a touch of the divine does not diminish Jesus. Indeed, concern about who is most divine is only an issue when mimetic rivalries determine self-esteem. That said, we should be cautious when claiming divine inspiration. The human capacity for self-deception is strong, and it is tempting to believe that our acquisitive mimetic desires reflect the will of God. We should be wary of attributing to God self-serving desires that harm others.

Miracles and Faith

Some Christians have doubted the Bible’s miracle stories, in part because they diminish the importance of faith. If Jesus had really performed miracles, following him would be the only rational choice and not a matter of faith. It would be prudent to follow Jesus not because his teachings were good or true, but because he had unequivocally demonstrated his authority.

Some people have questioned the historical validity of the miracle stories because they seem too incredible for contemporary, scientifically oriented minds. Whether or not the miracles actually happened, the miracle stories repeatedly point to important lessons of Jesus’ ministry. John’s Gospel consistently refers to Jesus’ miracles as “signs” because they had instructional value. As discussed in Chapter 9, many of the miracles involved healing, and they highlighted the importance of the holistic healing of the body, mind, and soul. Complete healing restores a sense of wholeness, which requires more than fixing malfunctioning body parts. Healing involves restoring a sense of connection to the

community and to the source of life and meaning, which Christians identify as God. Jesus demonstrated such healing by curing the woman with perpetual bleeding and then declaring, “Your faith has made you well” (Mark 5:34).

Jesus’ miraculous feeding of 5,000 by multiplying the fishes and loaves of bread is another story that points to an important teaching. John’s Gospel relates that the people were becoming hungry. Then a “lad” shared his food, and subsequently there was enough for everyone (John 6:9-11). Evidently, Jesus inspired this lad to share, which was quite miraculous given that scarcity tends to encourage people to hoard. Everyone was fed, perhaps because the lad’s example encouraged others to share.

Our culture has generally regarded the world in terms of scarcity. We see the pursuit of resources as a zero-sum game: for every winner, there is a loser. Jesus showed a different way. He asserted that God’s love and grace are abundant, so we do not need to worry about scarcity. If we show love for each other, there will be enough for everyone. Whether Jesus actually miraculously multiplied the fishes and bread is not critical to the story. What is undeniable is the miraculous change in the people; they came to realize that compassion and sharing result in there being enough for everyone.³

Jesus taught that compassionate, caring communities find ways to meet everyone’s needs. It requires faith to believe that we can work together as communities to attain peace and well-being.

Chapter 6: The Pauline Letters and Christian Faith



Why Attributing “The Wrath” to God Might be a Grievous Error

The temperament of God seems to vary widely in the Bible. Many passages in the Hebrew Scriptures portray God as angry or even wrathful, but many other passages, particularly in the writings of many of the later prophets, depict God as loving, compassionate, and concerned about victims.

The Hebrew Scriptures describe God as evolving over time, becoming more loving, compassionate, and just. Many Christians still think that God can be wrathful. Rev. Paul J. Nuechterlein has argued that a principal reason for this is a misunderstanding of “the wrath” in Paul’s letter to the Romans.¹ In this letter, nearly all English Bibles repeatedly add the word “God” and translate this as “the wrath of God or “God’s wrath.” Translators have assumed, perhaps incorrectly, that this is what Paul meant.

Why is this important? For centuries, Christians, seeing God as wrathful and vengeful, have been tempted to assist in “God’s work” by meting out violent “justice” against perceived wrongdoers. In theory, God is fully capable of meting out whatever vengeance God might desire (Deuteronomy 32:35; see also Hebrews 10:30). However, when people believe they have been wronged, they frequently conclude that perpetrators have violated God’s laws. Eager to see “God’s vengeance” satisfied, people have been inclined toward “righteous” violence.

Paul used the word wrath (*orgé*) ten times in Romans. The first time (Romans 1:18), Paul actually wrote “wrath of God,” but never after that. In Paul’s time, Jews and early Christians generally attributed calamities and general strife to God’s wrath, so it was reasonable for Paul to introduce *orgé* in association with God. Paul then quickly clarified his position by showing that the human suffering associated with wrath was actually a consequence of human action. In Romans 1:24, 1:26, and 1:28, Paul described how God “gave up” people to the consequences of their idolatry of worshipping human desires rather than God.² In other words, in

Romans 1:18, Paul introduced the well-known topic of “the wrath of God” because his readers believed that human suffering was a consequence of God’s anger. Paul next argued that human misery was actually a consequence of human activities. After Romans 1:18, Paul repeatedly described conflict and misery as “the wrath,” and he did not attribute the conflict and misery to God.

Romans 3:1-7, a challenging text discussed in the notes section,³ reveals much about Paul’s theology about the wrath. The wrath relates to God allowing humans to suffer the consequences of their idolatries and wickedness (Romans 1:24-28). Humans, failing to reflect God’s love and forgiveness, have always been eager to punish “sinners.” This is why Jesus told his disciples, “The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think that he is offering service to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father, nor me” (John 16:2-3).

The Faith of Christ versus Faith in Christ

Many Christians believe that whether a person is “justified,” or is right with God, depends on whether or not that person believes Jesus is their personal Lord and Savior. In other words, faith, not works, justifies us in the eyes of God. This view largely derives from reading Romans 3:21-22 as follows: “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ (*pisteos Christou*) for all who believe.”

The Greek phrase *pisteos Christou* is a genitive construction that could be translated as either “faith in Christ” or “faith of Christ.”⁴ In Romans 4:16, Paul used a similar genitive construction to describe the faith of Abraham. Obviously, he meant the faith of Abraham rather than faith in Abraham because neither the Hebrews nor anyone else regarded Abraham as a god. When Paul clearly wished to communicate “in,” he used the Greek word *en*. In Ephesians 1:15 and Colossians 1:4, *en* is used for faith in Christ, but neither passage states that faith in Christ is essential for justification. Further, scholars have doubts about Paul’s authorship of these two epistles. Therefore, even though many English Bibles have *pisteos Christou* translated as faith in Christ, in Paul’s undisputedly authentic letters, specifically Romans 3:22 and 3:26, Galatians 2:16 and 3:22, and Philippians 3:9, faith of Christ seems more appropriate. Translators, when trying to determine the meaning of par-

ticular passages, invariably impose their own theology and beliefs onto the text. There is no way for translators to know with certainty what the original writers meant to convey. Translators who have been convinced that the New Testament aims to equate Jesus with God might have been prompted, perhaps mistakenly, to translate *pisteos Christou* as “faith in Christ.”⁵

Why is this important? For one thing, if faith in Christ alone justifies us, works seem unimportant. However, on closer inspection, this theology still requires one work – to have faith in Christ.⁶ One reason I find this theology problematic is that this work is too easy for some people and too hard for others. Those who believe that their faith alone justifies themselves have little incentive to serve God’s creation or make meaningful self-sacrifices in service to others. This attitude accords well with contemporary American consumerism and narcissism, but its relative indifference to those who are poor, weak, or vulnerable strikes me as at odds with Jesus’ ministry. Conversely, faith in Christ can be exceptionally hard for those who have experienced great loss or profound suffering. They often feel abandoned, and they doubt the existence of a loving God.

In contrast to the work of having faith in Christ, I see having the faith of Christ as a gift. We know from Jesus’ life, teachings, and death that the faith of Christ involves love, compassion, and caring. When this faith abides in us, we can find it soothing and empowering. However, if we cannot find that faith in our hearts and minds, we are not necessarily bad, evil, or unjustified in God’s eyes. I think that a just and compassionate God would not judge people unfavorably if their only “fault” is that they are unable to believe in God’s love, whether their lack of faith has resulted from deep wounds or from their reflections on whether or not belief in God’s love is reasonable.

The Bible relates that, through God’s grace (Romans 5:2, 5:15; 2 Corinthians 4:15; Ephesians 4:7; Titus 2:11; Hebrews 2:9, 12:15; James 4:6; 1 Peter 4:10), we can become transformed by the faith of Christ. Christians experience this by becoming new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), and their works naturally reflect having Christ’s faith. Though we are not saved by works per se, our loving, compassionate deeds reflect our adopting the faith of Christ. Jesus said, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves” (John 14:11). With such faith, we abide in God and God abides in us (see John 14:20, 15:10; 1 John 2:24, 4:6).

Guided by the Faith of Christ

The faith of Christ encourages us to serve God. This, I think, is why James focused on works:

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But some one will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by works will show you my faith (James 2:14-18).

It is noteworthy that, aside from the salutation, the only other time James refers to Jesus Christ is to emphasize the faith of Christ: “My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (2:1).

Another important implication of focusing on the faith of Christ is that such faith is not an individual choice or event. Gaining this faith almost always involves communal participation, which is why we need faith communities to develop and maintain our faith. It is through the collective faith of these communities that people express the faith of Christ, supporting and inspiring each other. While the vicissitudes of life may strengthen or weaken our own, individual faith in Christ, Christian communities can support its members through a collective expression of the faith of Christ. When we manifest the faith of Christ in our works, we help others cope with difficult situations, which can inspire them to perform similar works of love when they can.

Guided by the Faith of Christ

Christians are called to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). As inherently mimetic beings, we need a human model to emulate for us to seek perfection. According to the Bible, God told Peter, James, and John, “This is my beloved Son . . . listen to him” (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; see Luke 9:35), and Jesus instructed his disciples:

“Follow me.” Being Christian involves, among other things, choosing Jesus as a model because Jesus modeled his life on God’s desires. This is why Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his

own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise” (John 5:19).

Paul understood well the importance of having Jesus as the model for our desires. He told the Philippians, “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus” (2:3-5). Jesus sought only to serve God, and we should do likewise. Jesus as our model helps us to accomplish this.

Christians are called to be humble and to serve (Philippians 2:6-8), not be served. Jesus dramatized this by washing his disciples’ feet (John 13:5-11), and then he instructed his disciples, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (13:14-15).

Service to God can satisfy our need for self-esteem because such work is inherently meaningful. When we assess our self-worth by comparing ourselves to our peers, we constantly struggle to outperform them in never-ending contests. In this human world of rivalry and conflict, people often feel that they can never get enough money, power, or prestige. In contrast, by serving God, we can gain a sense of self-worth that has no relationship to our standing among our fellow humans. Humans have always generated and maintained community by scapegoating innocent victims, but the faith of Christ encourages us to generate and maintain community through love.

Faith as Experience

Among the first Christians, faith was a matter of experience. The disciples who had earlier abandoned Jesus had an experience at Pentecost that inspired them to spread the gospel. Experiences, which have always been important to Christian faith, have included experiences in our communities, in nature, in prayerful meditation, and, for some people, a “conversion experience” that involved an intense feeling of God’s presence. Belief that God has worked through Jesus and that God continues to work through the Holy Spirit means that Christians profess a faith in divine action within the world – the same divine action described by the Bible’s stories.

For reasons discussed earlier, many people find it difficult or im-

possible to trust in the Bible as a complete and accurate description of God's role in the world. Nevertheless, a Christian does not need to believe that the Bible's stories are perfectly accurate historically to believe that they reveal truths about humanity, human community, and God. Further, those with different approaches to the Bible can find common ground in the Bible's depiction of Jesus as reflecting God's compassion, mercy, and love. The Bible teaches that those who strive to love each other, as Jesus did, can come together in a supportive, harmonious community.

Living out Faith

On the road to Damascus, Jesus said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). Saul had been blind to his own participation in the scapegoating process. He had consented to the stoning of the innocent Stephen (Acts 7:58-8:1). Then, Paul's experience with Jesus left him blind. When we can see, we readily mimic the values and beliefs of those around us. Unable to see, Saul could search inside his own mind and start to recognize how he had participated in unjust violence. He was so transformed that even his name was changed.

By striving to mirror the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 2:5), we can resist the human tendency to participate in "righteous" violence and, instead, express love. I think this is a central component of the experience of being born again, which inspired Paul to spread the gospel among the Gentiles. Christians are likewise called to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19; see also Mark 13:10; 16:15, Luke 24:47).

Without the mind of Christ, Christians tend to focus their lives on mimetic rivalries and other conflicts. Therefore, Paul wrote, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another" (Galatians 5:25-26).

Christian living, which should include showing love and defending victims, can be inconvenient, challenging, or risky. People might struggle socially and financially, and they might be ostracized or even persecuted. Nevertheless, Jesus reassured his followers, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Perhaps the reason is that, despite the hardships of discipleship, following Jesus can provide a sense of purpose and an inner peace.

Religious and Non-religious Faith

What about those who remain skeptical about Christian claims regarding Jesus' divinity, the nature of God, or even God's existence? Some find meaning and truth in one of the many non-Christian faiths, and I think their faith reflects the faith of Christ as long as their faith encourages unbounded love. Some people reject all religions and hold that we live in an entirely material, ultimately meaningless universe. They might be right, but such a view fails to explain consciousness adequately. Scientists, who have associated consciousness with certain parts of the brain, have predicted that further research will be able to fully explain consciousness in materialist terms. I am skeptical, partly because identifying the neurotransmitters and brain locations associated with consciousness does not explain how I have subjective experiences. My own consciousness invites metaphysical, nonmaterial explanations, which I and others associate with God.

Regardless of our religious outlook, we need convictions about the way things ought to be to make choices that we believe are moral and meaningful. As an act of faith, I believe in a creative force that does care about creation. I aim to live as if God were about love because I think it is a reasonable hypothesis and because I find I need such faith to inspire me in the face of life's challenges. And, even if I were wrong about God, faith that God is about love would not harm anyone else.

"There Is Neither Jew nor Greek"

People generally establish relationships with boundaries defined by features such as gender, family, clan, and nation. In Acts 10, Peter learned in a dream that these were human, not divine, distinctions. Peter had been taught not to eat with Gentiles, but, reflecting on a dream, he concluded, "God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28). The sacred, hierarchical order is based on exclusion and has its roots in the scapegoating process. The sacred order heralded by Jesus is inclusive and devoid of scapegoating victims.

Paul emphasizes that Jesus sought to eliminate the boundaries that keep us from loving each other: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). What about the distinction between humans and nonhumans? Are humans and nonhumans "one

in Christ Jesus”? I think in one sense the answer is yes and in another it is no. Animals and humans have feelings and have the capacity to make moral choices (see Chapter 1), and they both are important parts of God’s creation. However, according to the Bible, only humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), which gives humans special responsibilities. God instructs Adam to till and keep the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15), and it follows that Adam’s descendants should similarly care for God’s creation. Just as Jesus was called to serve God and God’s creation, the degree to which we manifest our divine nature is the degree to which we answer the call to serve God.

Humans are distinctive, but not unique, in our concern about self-esteem, which tends to make us desire vengeance when we feel offended. Consequently, communities bounded by love need to be willing to forgive.

Chapter 7: Forgiveness



Forgiveness versus Retaining Sins

The Bible related that, after the Resurrection, Jesus greeted his disciples, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21-23). The disciples had abandoned Jesus in his time of crisis, even though Peter had promised never to abandon him (Matthew 26:33, 35; Mark 14:29; Luke 22:33; John 13:37). Yet upon his return, Jesus did not condemn the disciples. Instead, he said, “Peace be with you,” which demonstrated that Jesus still loved his disciples and that he forgave them.

The disciples’ experience of being forgiven helped prepare them to teach Jesus’ ministry of love. Most people feel entitled, or obliged, to avenge perceived offenses against them. However, on finding that Jesus had, out of love, forgiven them, they could appreciate the power of love and the appropriateness of forgiveness. Similarly, when Jesus met Saul on the road to Damascus, he did not rebuke Saul for persecuting Christians. Instead, Jesus called Saul to discipleship.

What did Jesus mean when he said, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven”? Forgiving sins allows people who believe they have been offended to move past old resentments.¹ Jesus then said, “if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” indicating that those who remain resentful and vengeful are unable to forgive and heal broken relationships.

After the Resurrection and immediately before departing from the disciples, Jesus said, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:46-47). Repentance and forgiveness of sins would be the disciples’ principal teaching because these are essential to establishing peaceful communities based on love.

Our desire to feel justified by God strongly encourages us to rationalize even our most violent or hurtful acts as righteous, and Proverbs says, “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes” (21:2). Christian faith teaches that God offers forgiveness to everyone (see, for example, 1 John 1:9), so we do not need to justify our misdeeds to prove worthy of God’s love. Relieved of this burden, we can face our sins and repent of them. Still, we must choose to repent in order to experience God’s forgiveness. Experiencing forgiveness, as the disciples and Paul experienced Jesus’ forgiveness, helps prepare us to forgive those who have hurt us.

How to Forgive and Restore Peace

Jesus tried to teach people, who naturally tend to fall into divisive rivalries, how to live peacefully with each other. He recognized the importance of forgiveness, and when Peter asked if he should forgive his brother as many as seven times, Jesus replied, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22). If we repeatedly forgive our brother, eventually he will very likely cease to offend us because we will have given him no new cause to feel offended. If we act out against him, he will likely offend us again in “righteous” anger.

When expressing forgiveness, we should not convey insincerity or condescension. We should acknowledge our own contribution to the conflict, ask for forgiveness, and then, if appropriate, express how we forgive the other. When our communication is respectful, loving, and compassionate, others can recognize ways in which they have been selfish or thoughtless. They may then adopt a more loving frame of mind, forgive us for our sins against them, and work with us toward reconciliation. If we are accusatory and judgmental, we become locked into conflicts that are frequently resolved with physical or emotional violence. This dynamic helps account for numerous conflicts in families, in churches, and between nations that have undermined community as well as Isaiah’s vision (11:6-9) to see creation reconciled. Christians are called to be one body in Christ (Romans 12:5; Galatians 3:28), but judging people excludes and divides. Therefore, Paul wrote, “Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother” (Romans 14:13).

Of course, even when our forgiveness is unconditional, it is not

always accepted. Some people refuse forgiveness, either because they do not believe they have done anything wrong or because they cherish the resentments that forgiveness threatens to disarm. For many people, their resentments allow them to maintain a self-image as a victim, which excuses their anger and hostility. In these situations, we can only forgive in our own hearts pray that, perhaps with the aid of the Holy Spirit, their hearts will soften. We are to follow the instruction: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:12-13).

Love’s Transformative Power

We tend to avoid angry, bitter people because they generally are unpleasant company and they can be dangerous. Often, such people have been deeply wounded. Their anger reflects a fear of being hurt again, and they express anger to protect themselves physically and emotionally. If we are willing to patiently listen to their points of view with an empathetic ear, withhold judgment, and have compassion for their pain, we will often ease their fear, lighten their burden, and reduce their anger.

Some people seem incapable of expressing love, and this is likely because they have had little or no experience of being loved themselves. Christian faith teaches that God loves everyone and offers forgiveness for all sins. However, many people have trouble believing that God loves them because they know that they have sinned in serious ways and they do not feel forgivable. This is particularly the case if they, in my opinion mistakenly, regard God as wrathful (see Chapter 6). How can we be sure that God forgives us? Science can describe chromosomes, cells, and organs, but it cannot explain consciousness.

How can inanimate matter result in something that has subjective experience? Perhaps the mystery relates to an immaterial, creative force that Christians call God. If God is responsible for consciousness, it would be reasonable to believe that God cares about all conscious beings, and an expression of that concern would include offering forgiveness for those who have sinned.

If we believe that we are forgiven, we may forgive all who have wronged us, love everything, and enjoy the serenity that comes from following Jesus in obedience to God's will. This is the peace of mind enjoyed by the saints and by Jesus, who genuinely suffered on the cross but was still able to exclaim, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46)²

Those who have been deeply wounded can have difficulty feeling loved by God. Often, they either reject belief in God's existence or they are angry at God for allowing their misfortune. They find it hard to believe that God actually loves them if God permitted them to suffer so grievously. I think experiencing God's love is a form of grace. We can help people find and experience that grace by expressing love. To the degree that we make choices that hurt any part of God's creation, we show hardness of heart and we fail to reflect God's love. Hurtful actions do more than directly harm the victims; they tell the world, including those desperately in need of healing, that either we do not think it is important to reflect God's love, or that we believe that God is not loving.

The Role of Judgment

It is natural for people to judge each other, but Jesus said, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3; Luke 6:41). The problem is that our judgments are almost always imperfect because human actions have multiple motivations. Further, we can usually find one or more "good" reasons to justify our actions. Consequently, we tend to disagree with and resent negative judgments about us, and these resentments can divide communities.

The New Testament suggests that God does not participate in our judgments. Jesus taught that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good" (Matthew 5:45). Indeed, Jesus asked God to forgive those responsible for murdering him "for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Not passing judgment is different from discerning right from wrong. As the murderous mob descended upon St. Stephen, "He knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'" (Acts 7:60). Stephen identified their act as a sin, but evidently he did not judge them as evil or believe that they deserved punishment. Should we forgive criminals? We should not aim to punish on the

grounds of righteous vengeance because our biases, prejudices, and tendencies to join the scapegoating mob render us ill-equipped to determine who deserves punishment. However, a community's legitimate safety concerns might mandate imprisonment or other means to prevent people from harming others or to deter criminal behavior.

It is helpful to remain mindful that moral judgments do not require that we judge others as either saintly or contemptible. Jesus said, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Matthew 7:1-2; see also Luke 6:37). In other words, when we judge other people, we are liable to receive similar judgment. For example, when meat eaters feel condemned by vegans, they often become defensive, make reciprocal accusations at the vegans, and close their hearts and minds to the vegan message. On the other hand, when vegans denounce the institution of factory farming as cruel, they are discerning right from wrong. They are not judging the moral fiber of those involved in factory farming. If vegans refrain from attacking people or assuming a holier-than-thou posture, meat eaters are more likely to see veganism as a loving and compassionate choice.

James wrote, "Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (4:17). We do not know whether or not others know what is right. Therefore, we are poorly positioned to determine whether other people are sinful.

We often contribute significantly to conflicts with others. When we judge them, our judgment often constitutes scapegoating because it almost always involves projecting our guilt onto them. Indeed, Paul wrote, "Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (Romans 2:1). When we fail to forgive, our position is often like that of the ungrateful debtor whose king forgave his large debt, but he then refused to forgive another man's much smaller debt (Matthew 18:23-34).

How to Find Forgiveness in Our Hearts

While suffering and dying on the cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Note that Jesus asked God to forgive them; he did not announce that he forgave his tormentors himself. If Jesus had forgiven them himself, the mob would

likely have rejected his forgiveness because the mob felt entitled to its actions and did not believe they needed forgiveness.

When one genuinely loves everybody, one wants them to be forgiven, even for their crimes. One will want evildoers to desist from hurting other individuals, of course, but love vanquishes one's desire for vengeance. Being human, we sometimes find it impossible to forgive those who we perceive as having deeply wounded us. If we believe that God offers forgiveness for sinners like us, the best we can do is, like Jesus, pray for God to forgive them.³

Great spiritual leaders have offered guidance on how to find forgiveness in our hearts. Borrowing from a wide range of sources, I offer the following thoughts that have been helpful for me. In deep prayer or meditation, I first reflect on God and on my belief that, as a creation of God, I am loved and can be forgiven by God. This helps give me the strength I need to acknowledge my weaknesses and sins. Then, I reflect on my anger: Why am I angry? How is my anger coloring my life? Am I mindful of the pain, suffering, and conflicts in the lives of those toward whom I am angry? Then, I reflect on my guilt: Why do I feel guilty? What can I do to atone for the harmful things I have done? Then, I reflect on my shame: When did I feel ashamed? Would God disapprove? Facing the inner voices of anger, guilt, and shame that haunt me, rather than trying to repress those voices, I find it much easier to forgive other people and to forgive myself. Such forgiveness helps provide a sense of inner peace that makes it much easier for me to express love and compassion.

A Lesson in Forgiveness: The Adulteress

The story about the adulteress (John 8:3-11) relates that the scribes and Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by asking whether they, acting according to the Law of Moses, should stone the guilty woman. Initially, Jesus wrote something in the sand rather than reply. This broke the mob's momentum toward stoning her. If they had not been forced to pause and think, they would have stoned her regardless of Jesus' response. Then, after saying, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7), Jesus again wrote in the sand. Mimetic theory suggests that, if Jesus had met the mob's gaze, the angry accusers would have projected their anger onto him.⁴ They would likely have regarded Jesus' gaze, however loving and compassionate it was, as an

accusation and an affront. They might have then killed Jesus, as well as the adulteress.

When Jesus challenged the crowd to produce someone without sin to cast the first stone, he was demanding that someone step away from the crowd and take responsibility for the violence. Mimetic theory posits that people are very reluctant to act without prompting from someone else, and indeed nobody came forward to commence the stoning.

Jesus forgave the adulteress' sin before she asked for forgiveness or even expressed repentance or regret. Then, he told her to sin no more. If Jesus had demanded her repentance, she would likely have come up with excuses for her behavior because presumably she had once felt justified in committing adultery. Jesus showed that her sin was forgivable. Therefore, she did not need to find excuses for her behavior, and she could then repent of her sin and resolve not to commit it again.

What Born Again Means

Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, 5). Rebirth requires water, a universal symbol of renewal that mixes everything together and washes away differences. Without differences, we no longer see ourselves as better or worse than our neighbors, and this undermines the mimetic rivalries that divide us from each other and separate us from God. Regarding the Spirit, I think people experience this in different ways. A common denominator, from faithful Christians to atheist humanists, is a conviction that we should seek peace and harmony.

If one is born again, part of what dies are human delusions about "righteous" violence. We then become prepared, as Jesus instructed, to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; see Luke 10:27). Being born again means becoming "in Christ," and Paul wrote, "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Nevertheless, even after experiencing such a spiritual transformation, it takes great faith to believe that the path to peace is not by force but rather by love and forgiveness.

For Christians, being born again is a matter of choosing Jesus as the center of our faith and the model for our actions. Can people of

other faiths be born again? I think that anyone can experience rebirth if they have a sense of transformation that compels them to seek to renounce acquisitive mimetic desires and to reflect God's loving desires for all creation. Given that most humans lived before Jesus' ministry, and that many people have little or no exposure to Christianity today, I am doubtful that God reserves rebirth only for Christians. I think rebirth has always been available to anyone who is open to spiritual transformation.

Does being born again mean that one no longer sins? Paul lamented, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:19). Though Paul was evidently discouraged by his shortcomings, he acted in a spirit of repentance. Born again, Paul desired to sin no more. We always fall far short of God's perfection (Romans 3:23), but being reborn helps us align our desires with God's desires. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied how this might be possible:

This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . . for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

When the Hebrews left Egypt, they needed the Law to keep order and avoid anarchy. Jeremiah foresaw of a time when the Hebrews would no longer need the Law. Instead, there would be a new covenant between God and God's people, in which God's law would be written on everyone's heart, and nobody would need instruction. Isaiah similarly prophesied a time in which "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord," and all creation will live harmoniously and nonviolently (Isaiah 11:6-9, 65:25).

Lessons from *The Sunflower*

Christians are called to love and forgive their enemies, even enemies who have abused or continue to abuse them. Can we forgive on behalf of other individuals who have suffered and continue to suffer at human hands? Simon Wiesenthal's remarkable story *The Sunflower* explores this question.⁵

While in a Nazi concentration camp, Wiesel was called to the bedside of a dying German soldier, who confessed to participating in the murder of about 300 Jews. They had been crowded into a building that was set ablaze, and he and fellow soldiers shot those who tried to escape out the windows. The soldier asked Wiesel, a Jew, to forgive him. Wiesel listened to the soldier's entire story, allowed the soldier to take his hand, and then left without speaking. The soldier died the next day and left all his possessions to Wiesel, who refused them. Wiesel caused considerable consternation among his friends in the concentration camp when he asked them whether he had done the right thing in allowing the soldier to tell his story and request forgiveness. They could not understand how Wiesel could have any concern or compassion for a Nazi soldier because Nazis had murdered their relatives and friends and would likely murder them.

Wiesel miraculously survived, and after the war he asked dozens of people from a wide range of backgrounds whether or not he had done the right thing. Their responses varied. Why did Wiesel want to know whether he had acted rightly? I think he needed to know whether the Nazis, who had killed many members of his family, stolen his possessions, and reduced him to a pathetic, starving, miserable man, had also destroyed his values and sense of decency.

Wiesel could not forgive on behalf of people he never knew, but his listening to the dying man's story showed compassion and silently communicated that God might forgive the soldier. Does forgiveness mean that there should be no consequences for destructive behavior? Wiesel did not think so. Although he showed human compassion by listening to the dying Nazi soldier, after the war Wiesel was a leading figure in efforts to capture Nazi criminals. He believed it was necessary to bring them to justice, so that future generations would know that people must be held accountable for their actions.

One difficulty with Wiesel's quest for "justice" is that those who have committed offenses often perpetuate further crimes to avoid prosecution. Gangs often require initiates to commit a crime because it is difficult to leave a gang that knows about one's illegal activities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa illustrates an approach that reduces the likelihood that the quest for justice will escalate violence. The Commission invited victims of Apartheid to relate their stories, and many of those who perpetrated political crimes were offered amnesty if their crimes were not excessively heinous and if they fully disclosed their crimes. The TRC sought to procure

justice through apology, forgiveness, and restitution. The process did not satisfy everyone, but it did facilitate a peaceful transfer of power from white minority rule to majority rule.⁶

Wiesenthal, by listening to the dying Nazi soldier's story, demonstrated that Nazi crimes against him and his family had not vanquished his ability to show compassion in the face of evil. Can the power of love overcome evil?

Chapter 8: The Power of Love versus the Power of Satan



Loving Our Neighbor as Ourselves

John declared, “He who does not love does not know God; for God is love” (1 John 4:8). If God is love, then God does not embrace heartlessness, cruelty, or vengeance. Evidently, John recognized that without love we fall into bitter rivalries that often lead to violence: “He who does not love remains in death. Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. . . Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:14-15, 18). Words alone are meaningless; love involves action. Paul expressed similar sentiments when he wrote, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10). These writings accord with Jesus’ comment, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

Throughout his ministry, Jesus taught that God wants us to love:

A lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live” (Luke 10:25-28).

Note that the first instruction is to love God totally; then, love your neighbor as yourself. If a person loves God, it follows that the person should show respect for God by caring for God’s creation, which includes fellow humans, God’s animals, and God’s earth.

The lawyer then asked who is a “neighbor,” and Jesus replied with

the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this parable, and in many other biblical passages, love involves action, which accords with Jesus' saying, "Do this, and you will live." Showing love, rather than just claiming to love, is how we discern true prophets from false prophets. Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:15-16).

Jesus declared, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-36). Paul echoed these sentiments (Romans 13:8-9, Galatians 5:22-23).

If we love our neighbor as ourselves, we will desire their well-being as much as we desire our own, and divisive mimetic rivalries will vanish.

Covenantal Relationships

The Bible describes several crucial relationships as covenantal, in that they involve commitments from one or both parties. They include God's covenant with all creation not to flood the earth again (Genesis 9); with humans and all creatures to one day establish peace and harmony (Hosea 2:18); with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make them patriarchs of great nations (Genesis 17; Leviticus 26:42); and with the Hebrews to provide the Promised Land (Exodus 6:4) and the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28). Regarding the Ten Commandments, God would protect the Hebrews if they abided by the laws.

Such covenantal relationships can serve as models for our committed relationships, including those with life partners and with kin. In contrast, relationships based on acquisitive mimetic desire tend to be unstable because the goal of such relationships is to enhance one's own self-esteem. People tend to abandon relationships grounded on acquisitive mimetic desire when they fail to impress peers, become unprofitable, or otherwise cease to enhance self-esteem.¹

The Meaning of Eternal Life

John wrote, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that

whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). If God were only interested in saving from death those who believe in the Son, it would have made no sense to mention that God gave the Son for the benefit of the world, including those who are intellectually unable to believe, such as young children, mentally disabled people, and animals. I think that it is more reasonable to believe that Jesus came to reconcile all creation, not just those who have faith in Jesus. This is why “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19). Those “sons of God”² have faith in God’s redemptive power, and they, being new creations in Christ, will herald a new age when “he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more” (Revelation 21:4).

What does “everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” mean? Many people think “eternal life” refers to a permanent afterlife. I think that “eternal” communicates a different concept. “Eternal” means unbounded by time, which describes God’s existence much better than human existence because human lives inexorably lead to death. I think we can experience eternal life when we feel connected to the timeless universe. One way that Christians and many other people of faith can get this sense of connection to the universe is by aligning themselves with God, which could be understood as the creative force of the universe. We can feel aligned with God by serving God, for example by caring for God’s creation.

We gain further insight from Buddhism, which I regard as a philosophy that does not necessarily compete with Christianity. The above notion of “eternal” accords with the state of mind that the Buddhists call “awakened” or “enlightened,” in which mindfulness is so complete that the person no longer feels trapped in a vulnerable, aging body but rather feels perfectly connected to the cosmos.

Do humans and animals have an afterlife? I think it is unreasonable to believe that humans have an afterlife and animals do not. Humans and animals have much in common at genetic, physiological, and emotional levels. Some have argued that only humans have a soul, yet the Hebrew Scriptures use the same words, *nephesh chayah*, to describe the essence of both humans and animals. When relating to humans, translators of Genesis 2:7 have called *nephesh chayah* “soul” (King James Version) or “being” (Revised Standard Version). In Genesis 2:19, which refers to animals, they have translated *nephesh chayah* as “creature.” Those who have used these verses to claim that only humans have souls have relied on translators’ biases and not the

Scriptures themselves. Indeed, the author of Ecclesiastes wrote,

For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth? (Ecclesiastes 3:19-21).

Paul's writings indicate his belief in an afterlife. He wrote to the Philippians, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account" (Philippians 1:23-24; see also Galatians 2:20 and Romans 6:3-4). Similarly, Christian tradition holds that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and that an afterlife awaits everyone.

Many people who have had a "near-death experience" (NDE) relate an out-of-body experience that has convinced them of an afterlife.³ However, it is difficult to determine the relevance of NDE claims for the likelihood of an afterlife. Upon dying, I do not know what will happen to the stable sense of self that I carry throughout my life that seems unchanged even while most of my body's cells die and are replaced. Our fear of death, which relates to the destruction of the self, encourages us to envision some kind of existence after our bodies have ceased to function. Whether or not there is an afterlife, Christian faith offers the possibility of eternal life. This faith is grounded in a conviction that God is about life and love, not death and destruction.

What Is Satan?

The Bible has several passages that seem to describe Satan as a separate individual, particularly in the Book of Job, in which Satan converses with God. However, to my reading, the Book of Job is a parable that explores important philosophical and theological questions related to righteousness, faithfulness, and the problem of evil in a world governed by God. I think it is helpful to regard Satan not as a distinct person but rather as the "satanic" part of the human psyche that is harmful and destructive.

There is ongoing conflict in the human mind between egocentric, self-serving desires and desires to be loving and connected to others.

When we find ourselves tempted to yield to harmful desires, we tend to blame other individuals for our shortcomings. Jesus squarely faced his own desires, and he found that he could overcome them. Commonly, people blame Satan for those harmful, destructive desires of which we are ashamed. I think we should recognize that nearly everyone has desires that, if acted upon, would meet widespread disapproval. When we try to deny our own satanic desires, we nearly always project our satanic desires onto others or act on the desires and then blame others for our transgressions.

The Bible repeatedly describes God choosing people to serve as prophets or disciples, while Satan, as a personification of harmful human desires, is an accuser and a trickster. Our satanic desires encourage us to believe that our satanic accusations reflect God's will.⁴ Job's friends, acting on satanic desires to justify themselves at Job's expense, falsely accused Job of offending God.

The mob that called for Jesus' crucifixion believed that Jesus was evil and that they were righteously abiding by God's will. The only way Jesus could unequivocally reveal humanity's satanic tendency to falsely accuse others was to allow himself to be an innocent victim. We are right to oppose those threatening to harm any innocent individual. However, if we accuse people of having evil, satanic motivations, we are yielding to the satanic desire to accuse others in order to elevate ourselves.

The Nature of "Satan"

Many people regard the biblical figure of Satan as a powerful, evil individual. However, such a view lends itself to the scapegoating process because people can justify their violence by believing that they are aligned with God while Satan controls others. I think it is helpful to regard Satan anthropologically – "Satan" describes the tendency of individual humans and communities to fall into mimetic rivalries that lead to violence and destructiveness.⁵

We see satanic human desires in Mark's Gospel, where a central theme is that the disciples had great difficulty understanding Jesus' message. They repeatedly competed with each other for prominence, and consequently they often failed to abide by Jesus' instruction that we love and serve each other. The disciples expected Jesus to become glorified and powerful, and they eagerly anticipated gaining power

and prestige as Jesus' closest associates. After Jesus denounced that he would soon be killed, Peter objected, and then Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mark 8:31-33 [see also Matthew 16:23]). Jesus said that his destiny included allowing himself to be rejected, killed, and raised again. Peter's acquisitive mimetic desire to gain power and glory was satanic.

Satan resembles a transcendent, godlike figure only when people regard Satan as a divine individual with the power to force people to do things. Satan has lost transcendence among those who regard destructiveness as a consequence of universal human attributes, such as acquisitive mimetic desires. Therefore, Jesus said, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). At best, satanic desires can tempt us, but they do not control us. When we lose faith in Satan's power, we are less inclined to accede to our own satanic desires, or to regard others as irremediably "possessed" individuals who must be expelled or killed.

Can Satan Cast out Satan?

Mark wrote:

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." And he called them to him, and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end" (3:22-26; see also Luke 11:14-18).

The humans who have accused people of satanic possession and then tried to eradicate Satan from their midst have been satanic. "Satan casting out Satan" describes the scapegoating process.⁶ When people claim that someone is possessed by Satan, they have assumed the satanic role of the accuser. They commonly come to participate in scapegoating. Jesus taught that the way of Satan is accusation. In contrast, the way of God is forgiveness, which breaks the cycle of accusation.

That Satan casts out Satan is true only in the sense that satanic forces do cast out the perceived Satan in a community's midst. How-

ever, attempts by Satan to cast out Satan merely divide the house and set the stage for future conflicts. Indeed, as long as scapegoating is the glue that holds communities together, the main difference between the victims and the victimizers is that victimizers are those who happen to have power at the moment. As long as Satan tries to cast out Satan, there will be communal strife. The only way to break the endless cycle of violence is to develop a new culture grounded on love and forgiveness, which is what Jesus taught.

Inspired by Jesus and perhaps assisted by the Holy Spirit, we may refuse to participate in scapegoating. If necessary, we may choose to assume the role, like Jesus, of the willing and forgiving victim. Whether or not satanic violence is self-defeating, faithful Christians are called to imitate Jesus and participate in the reconciliation of creation by being peacemakers (see Chapter 10). Some Christians hold that we should willingly submit to, rather than resist, scapegoating.⁷ Otherwise, the mob, unable to recognize its own satanic inclinations, will regard our resistance as satanic. Only if the mob recognizes the victims of scapegoating as innocent can the mob recognize that it is scapegoating. Otherwise, it sees its own scapegoating as righteousness and justice. Until abusers adopt the faith of Christ, who defends victims?

The Parakletos: Helper and Defender

In John 14:16-17, Jesus says,

And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor [*parakletos*], to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.

The Greek word *parakletos* is commonly translated as “the one who defends the accused”⁸ or “helper.” To my reading, Jesus was a counselor who assisted those who were sick, poor, widowed, or otherwise disenfranchised. As vulnerable individuals, they were frequently victims of scapegoating. John described “another Counselor” as the “Spirit of Truth” (14:17) and as “the Holy Spirit” (14:26).

Jesus said that the counselor “dwells with you.” How can we, as counselors, assist the accused? One way is to manifest the “Spirit of truth” by showing that the accusers have heaped excessive guilt upon

the accused. Jesus illustrated this by pointing out the hypocrisy of those who, in accusing a woman of adultery, felt entitled to pass judgment despite being sinful themselves (John 8:3-11; see also Matthew 23:35-37 and Mark 7:1-9). However, Jesus was but one person, and he maintained that the Holy Spirit would inspire future generations to assist and defend the accused. Therefore, Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father” (John 14:12).

Fear of Death

It can be difficult to appreciate God’s love because our worldview is colored by a fear of death. As discussed in Chapter 1, all human cultures have needed to address death-related anxieties. Perhaps faith that death is not the end would neutralize our fear of death, reduce our need to continually prove our self-worth, and position us to be more loving and compassionate.

Jesus did not avoid death; he died just as all of us will die. Jesus demonstrated that we can vanquish the power of death to rule our lives. Paul articulated this well in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.” . . . For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1:18-19, 22-24).

Paul was teaching that those who are perishing – who experience their lives as heading toward death – do not recognize that the lesson of the cross saves us from despairing about our mortality. Christian faith, which ultimately cannot be proven by signs or logic, encourages us to respond to the mystery of human existence with faith that God has put us here for important reasons, such as to serve God and creation. Such God-directed living can give us a sense of inner purpose and makes us feel alive. In contrast, if we focused our lives on satisfying one acquisitive mimetic desire after another, our lives would lack direction or meaning. We would desperately strive to feel alive by seek-

ing pleasurable bodily experiences. Consequently, we will experience the decay of our bodies with anger, disgust, fear, and loathing.¹⁰

Why do we exist at a certain place and at a certain time? What is it about our own individual identity that makes it ours and not anybody else's? Where did we come from? As best I can tell, science cannot answer such existential questions. Science can describe associations between brain matter and brain functions, but such information does not adequately explain, for example, my own subjective experiences. A reasonable hypothesis for my own subjective, conscious existence is that I was created by some kind of divine power that I call "God." I believe that God cares about my existence, and if that is the case, it is reasonable to believe that I am here to serve God by making God's creation a better place. This faith accords with my experiences of finding constructive, compassionate, loving activities and relationships meaningful and enjoyable. I think that to the degree that we internalize a faith in God's love, we reduce our fear of death, neutralize our desire to build self-esteem at the expense of others, and experience life as a miraculous gift.

The critical component of my faith is not that God exists because God's existence alone would not guide my life. Rather, the core of my faith relates to what I believe is God's nature. I believe God's essence is love, and I am convinced this was also the faith of Christ. Such a faith encourages us to respond to satanic desires and satanic activities with love and compassion. This can be very difficult because we often find ourselves physically and mentally wounded by life in general and hurtful people in particular, and we fear further wounds. Therefore, it is much easier to articulate this faith than to consistently act according to it. Our wounds often create barriers to our expressing God's love. Jesus taught us how to receive healing and to heal others.

Chapter 9: Healing



The Meaning of Demonic Possession

Today, physicians rely heavily on the biomedical model that views disease in terms of dysfunction of one or more body systems. However, the biomedical model often fails to address the psychological, spiritual, and social aspects of illness. Jesus exemplified holistic healing, which includes eradicating shame and social isolation.

What was seen in Jesus' time as "demonic possession" would likely be regarded as mental or physical illness today. Nearly everyone has physical maladies, and many of us suffer a degree of mental illness, though the severity varies widely. One form of mental illness, which many of us can keep hidden from public view, is addiction. Many people find it difficult to control certain desires, such as food, sex, alcohol, drugs, power, gambling, or fame. Such forms of addiction have parallels with "demonic possession," which indicates that Jesus' healing of "demonic possession" is related to contemporary social, psychological, and medical healing.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus began his ministry by entering the synagogue and healing a man with "an unclean spirit" (Mark 1:23-25). Notably, Jesus healed the man's demonic possession without harming the man. Often, humans have eradicated "demonic possession" by murdering or banishing those deemed to be possessed. This has obscured any evidence that members of the scapegoating mob might be similarly possessed.

Addictions and other forms of mental disease almost always have roots in past interpersonal relationships. Sometimes, a counselor or therapist can alleviate symptoms to the point that the person can function in society at large. Complete healing requires acceptance and full incorporation into the larger community. This requires that the community members acknowledge their own demons. Doing so helps prevent them from projecting their own illicit desires onto others, and it opens them up to the possibility that they have contributed to oth-

ers' addictions, maladaptive behaviors, or feelings of possession. Jesus was able to heal the possessed man, rather than scapegoat him because Jesus had already faced and rejected the three temptations that would have encouraged Jesus to project his own internal demons onto the "possessed" man.

A second remarkable aspect of Jesus' healing the possessed man is that this healing occurred in the synagogue, where Jesus repeatedly cast out demons (Mark 1:39). Only clean people were allowed in the synagogue, so people with "an unclean spirit" would normally have been excluded. Historically, religions have distinguished "clean" from "unclean" people because people are eager to convince others (and themselves) that they are clean and justified in the eyes of God. Such delusions of purity often make people feel entitled to condemn others as possessed by "unclean spirits," "evil inclinations," or "sinful desires." Jesus did not do what was customary at the time and expel the man from the synagogue. Instead, he chose to expel the demon.

A third point relates to how those in the synagogue received Jesus. Before Jesus healed the possessed man, they admired his teaching: "And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:22). Those with authority had been able to "cure" the problem of demonic possession only by killing or expelling the possessed person. However, Jesus healed with authority in a new way: "And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, 'What is this? A new teaching!' " (1:27). Remarkably, their amazement was not focused on the healing per se. Rather, they were astonished by the teaching, saying, "With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (1:27). The authorities had always cured possession by expulsion; Jesus' nonviolent solution to the problem of demonic possession was a new teaching.

Healing and Faith: The Woman with Perpetual Bleeding

The story of the woman with perpetual bleeding provides important insights into the nature of healing. Luke's version reads,

And a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years and could not be healed by any one, came up behind him, and touched the fringe of his garment; and immediately her flow of blood

ceased. And Jesus said, “Who was it that touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the multitudes surround you and press upon you!” But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; for I perceive that power has gone forth from me.” And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace” (Luke 8:43-48; see also Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34).

According to Jewish law, menstruating women were unclean and could not touch anyone or be touched. When Jesus asked who touched him, the woman was afraid because she feared Jesus would be angry at her violation of the law. However, Jesus did not express disgust or revulsion. Rather, he said only that he sensed power going forth from him.

The woman was compelled to confess because she knew that Jesus could identify her. However, in addition to acknowledging her act, she declared that she was healed. This, I think, is what Jesus recognized as her faith. Though he had participated in her cure, he did not say that he had healed her. Instead, he observed that her faith, which had inspired her to publicly declare that Jesus had healed her, had made her well.

This story illustrates an important point about disease. Disease (dis-ease) is a state of mind in which one does not feel well. One can have a dysfunctional body and not be diseased, and one’s body may be functioning quite adequately yet a person may experience disease. Everyone has the spiritual need for a sense of direction and purpose in life, which for many people involves a sense of connection to God. If our spiritual needs are not met, then we are prone to suffer existential anxiety and, consequently, to feel diseased even when our bodies work well. The woman’s faith made her well enough to align herself with Jesus, and she was prepared to “go in peace.” Likewise, after Jesus healed ten people with leprosy, only one returned to thank him; Jesus said to him, “Your faith has made you well” (Luke 17:19). Jesus healed the man’s illness, and the man’s faith healed his mind and spirit.

Holistic Healing: The Man with Leprosy

Scapegoating invariably involves having “insiders” and “outsiders.”

Jesus challenged the legitimacy of these distinctions by healing in the synagogues, where only “clean” people were allowed, and by going so far as to touch a man with leprosy (Mark 1:40-45). The ancient Hebrews believed that disease reflected God’s judgment. Consequently, they saw leprosy as a sign of sin. The man with leprosy was rejected by his community, and Jesus, “moved with pity . . . stretched out his hand and touched him” and made him clean. Jesus told the man to go directly to the priest “and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people” (Mark 1:44).

In ancient Hebrew culture, as in many other cultures, touching an unclean person rendered an individual unclean and consequently made the individual an outsider. Thus, the people believed that Jesus became an outsider when he touched and healed the man with leprosy. Jesus had told the man that, having been cleaned, he should “say nothing to any one.” But “he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter” (Mark 1:45). Because many people now regarded Jesus as unclean, Jesus was forced to reside in the countryside. Those who recognized their need for healing, unlike the members of the crowd, still sought Jesus’ ministrations.

The instruction to offer at the Temple “what Moses commanded” evidently relates to the animal sacrifices involved in the ritualistic cleansing of people with leprosy described in Leviticus 14. Nonetheless, I do not think that this story shows Jesus’ endorsement of animal sacrifice. As Jesus perhaps expected, the story indicates that the man did not comply with Jesus’ instruction to go to the Temple. The man, having been cleansed by Jesus, did not need cleansing in the Temple, which included the public humiliation of shaving the head, beard, and eyebrows (Leviticus 14:9). By instructing the man to follow the law, Jesus avoided scandalizing the religious authorities. This analysis, although speculative, accords with an image of Jesus as loving, merciful, compassionate, and wise.

Jesus reintroduced the man with leprosy into the community in several ways: Jesus first touched the man, signaling his regard for the man’s worth; Jesus then healed the man’s visible lesions; finally, Jesus declared him clean, making ritual shaving unnecessary.

Healing and Animals

Humanity's relationships with animals are fundamentally broken, and humans abuse and kill far more animals today than at any time in history. Most children have a natural empathy with animals, so callousness and cruelty require somehow hardening their hearts. Perhaps we can heal our relationship with animals if we can understand how this happens.

Nearly all adults participate directly or indirectly in animal suffering and death. Widespread concern for animal welfare could interfere with contemporary animal use in agriculture, clothing, experimentation, hunting, and entertainment. How do animal-loving children grow to be adults who acquiesce to or even endorse animal abuse?

Based on numerous conversations, it seems that frequently children, upon learning that hamburgers come from cows and that "chicken" is actually a part of a chicken, express a desire not to eat meat. In many households, parents sternly respond that the child must eat the meat or forgo dessert. When this happens, most children resolve the conflict between their hearts and their stomachs by ignoring their feelings and by not equating the meat on their plate with animals. However, as Christians we must acknowledge that whenever we hide the truth, we open the path to sin: "For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:20).

Those who live with farmed animals face particular difficulties. It is easier to suppress mental images of animals when one only sees cooked flesh on a plate, but children on farms must interact with and come to know the animals who will be killed and eaten. Programs such as 4-H, a USDA program for youth, help to eradicate children's normal love for animals. Many youths in 4-H take infant animals and raise them to "market" size. The children care for the animals, and often the children and the animals love and trust each other. For many children, their betrayal of a loving, trusting friend is a traumatic experience.¹ Subsequently, those children will likely be either wracked by guilt and self-loathing, or, more commonly, they will repress feelings of empathy for animals and come to see all farmed animals as "things" meant to be slaughtered and eaten.

Those who abuse others typically use terms that deny victims their individuality in order to objectify or demonize them. During the Rwandan genocide, killers called their victims "cockroaches," and peo-

ple often use animal names such as “pig,” “chicken,” and “cow” as epithets to express contempt for people they despise.² Notably, the animal names people employ to express disregard are those animals who humans eat or harm in other ways. Objectification and demonization typically accompany injustice, whether the victims are humans or animals.

Healing the Gerasene Demoniac

Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39 (see also Matthew 8:28-34) relate the story of the Gerasene demoniac. Jesus exorcised demons from a possessed man, and the demons then inhabited a herd of swine, who, crazed, ran down a steep bank and drowned (Matthew 8:32; Mark 5:13; Luke 8:33). James Allison argued that the Gerasene demoniac story reveals profound insights into scapegoating.³

The possessed man was the communal scapegoat. He bore the burden of the people’s unclean spirits, and they could blame him for their own forbidden thoughts and desires that threatened social order and peace. In Mark’s account, “Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones.” Normally, those deemed to be possessed were expelled or killed. Here, the man hid in the tombs and stoned himself, protecting himself from the scapegoat’s usual fate. His howling was an affront to them, but they did not kill him. Rather than kill him, they bound him in chains. Perhaps intentionally, these chains were insufficient to hold him, which allowed him to bruise himself with stones without causing lethal damage. His injuries to himself satisfied the community’s need for a scapegoat.

And so, there was a balance between the insufficient chaining by the community and the non-lethal self-stoning by the man. This balance allowed the possessed man to live while serving the community’s need for a scapegoat. Perhaps this unusual arrangement began when the scapegoat, recognizing that angry communal members were convinced of his demonic possession and were determined to stone him, started to stone himself. Because it seemed that the “demons” were already stoning the man, the community refrained from stoning him.

The possessed man naturally feared Jesus, who had said, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” (Mark 5:8). Jesus threatened the balance of violence between the man and the community, which could

have led to the man's death. When Jesus asked their names, the demons replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many" (Mark 5:9). The demons represented all the forbidden desires of the community. They reflected different components of the human psyche, and their lack of individual names indicated that they did not exist independently. The demons begged Jesus not to send them out of the country (Mark 5:10; "into the abyss" in Luke 8:31). I think that the request of the demons reflected the community's concern that exorcising the demons would have forced the community to acknowledge their own demons or find a new scapegoat onto whom they could project their guilt, fears, hatreds, and illicit desires.

Jesus transferred the demons into a herd of pigs, who, crazed, ran down a steep bank and drowned themselves. The community's response to the now-cured man is illuminating: "They were afraid" (Mark 5:15). Their scapegoat was cured, and, consequently, their peace and equanimity were threatened. Some commentators have argued that the people were upset about the economic loss of the pigs, but if that had been the case, the people would have been angry, not afraid. The Gerasene people asked Jesus to depart because he had damaged the social order. Meanwhile, the cured man begged to leave town with Jesus, most likely because the man was at high risk of being stoned by a community desperate to reestablish order. But Jesus refused the man's request, forcing the man to bear witness to Jesus' method of healing by exorcising demons rather than by destroying people. People marveled at the cured man's story, indicating that exorcising demons was not as societally devastating as everyone had feared.

The analysis of the Gerasene demoniac story contains the troubling implication that Jesus was responsible for the death of many innocent pigs. An interesting aspect of this story is that there is no such "steep bank" (Matthew 8:32; Mark 5:13; Luke 8:33) nor sea near Gerasa (Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26) or Gadara (Matthew 8:28).⁴ Perhaps including these details communicated to readers that one should regard this story as allegory rather than as literal historical narrative. Further evidence that the story is an allegory is that it is hard to imagine such a large herd of pigs as "about two thousand" pigs (Mark 5:13). Pigs, who do not have a strong herd instinct, would be much more inclined to wander off.

If one regards this story as an allegory, one can see how it uses metaphors that were familiar to the ancient Hebrews. The Hebrews regarded pigs as unclean and therefore appropriate repositories for

unclean spirits. Also, the Hebrews would have understood the image of evil spirits going to the bottom of the sea, where many ancient people believed evil spirits resided. If taken as allegory, this story relates important aspects about Jesus' ministry while retaining a conviction, well-grounded in Scripture, that Jesus cared about all of God's creation.

Healing a Broken World: The Man Born Blind

John 9 describes Jesus healing a man born blind. I would like to highlight several remarkable features of this story that relate to how Jesus' ministry was fundamentally a healing ministry.

The text reads, "And his disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him' " (John 9:2-3). Jesus rejected two widespread beliefs. Although Exodus 34:7 had declared that children are punished for the sins of their parents, Jesus taught along the lines of Ezekiel 18:14-17 that God does not visit punishment on the children of sinners. Furthermore, Jesus disputed the commonplace notion that disease is a sign of sin.

Jesus then said that he was doing the works of God, indicating that creation was not complete. This notion was reinforced by Jesus healing the man on the Sabbath. This angered the Jewish authorities, particularly since there was no evident urgency to heal the man. Similarly, after Jesus healed a paralyzed man he said, "My Father is working still, and I am working" (John 5:17). Interestingly, Jesus healed the blind man with dirt, which harkens back to Genesis 2:7, in which God created man with "dust from the ground." Jesus participated in God's work of completing creation.

Completing creation involves reconciling the world to God's original intentions, a world in which all creation lives peacefully and harmoniously (Genesis 1:29-30; see also Isaiah 11:6-9; 2 Corinthians 5:19). The universal fear of death is often a major stumbling block to our participation in the reconciliation of creation. Jesus recognized this when he said, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25; see also Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24, 17:33). The reason, I think, relates to the quest for self-esteem as a salve against the universal fear of death. If we do not ground our self-esteem in our relationship to God,

we can only gain self-esteem by being superior to other individuals. In practice, being superior often involves victimizing other individuals in an attempt to gain power, wealth, or whatever one's culture regards as valuable. However, no amount of self-esteem can fully eradicate the fear of death.

Even though humans can repress their fear of death from consciousness, death's inevitability haunts the subconscious mind. Consequently, the typical human response to fear of mortality has been to compulsively, relentlessly seek more self-esteem. Never having enough self-esteem to quell death anxieties, even people who are "successful" tend to find themselves perennially dissatisfied with their lives. Therefore, our human desire to save our life (i.e., to gain enough self-esteem to overcome the fear of death) causes us to fall into conflict with and become disconnected from the rest of creation. Creation is the ground of our being. Because alienation from creation increases our sense of mortality, the project to save our life results in a greater sense that we will lose it.

Healing: A Christian Calling

Healing is one way to answer our calling to express love. What can we do, specifically, to help heal? We can listen, which shows that we care; we can try to alleviate physical or psychological ailments; and we can offer respectful, appropriate touch, such as when Simon Wiesenthal let a dying Nazi hold his hand and confess his sin. Often, the greatest healing occurs when people have faith that they matter to each other and to God.

To widely varying degrees, we have all suffered. We have all experienced loss, and we have all been wounded, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by family, friends, strangers, and misfortune. Our experiences help us empathize with other wounded people, even if their pain is far deeper than what we have experienced.

Healing almost always is a communal activity. We are social creatures, and throughout our lives our social interactions shape and modify our sense of identity – who we are and how we relate to the larger universe. Our relationships profoundly affect whether we have a sense of meaning, whether we have good self-esteem, and whether we feel connected to or alienated from the world. Our sense of personal health is strongly linked to the health or pathology of our relationships.

We can have physical infirmities and still feel valuable and whole, and we can enjoy good physical health and still suffer from a sense of alienation and despair. Healing the body, mind, and soul is a communal activity, which reinforces the need for spiritual communities dedicated to mutual care, support, and healing.

How can we help heal those individuals who are unable to participate in communities of faith, such as people with mental disabilities or animals? Sometimes, we can help heal through mere presence or touch. Sometimes, we can help heal from afar, by mobilizing efforts to change the conditions that wound them. Many people believe that prayer can help heal by directing God's healing energy toward those in need.

Whatever we do to reconcile God's creation to the biblical ideal of peaceful, harmonious coexistence is a healing ministry. Consequently, healing often involves being a peacemaker.

Chapter 10: Peacemaking



What is Violence?

I regard violence as intentional, unnecessary physical or emotional harm. Not all harmful activities are violent, such as animals killing for food or responding to instinctive drives. Likewise, in general I do not regard self-defense or hunting when necessary for sustenance as violent acts.

The human capacity for self-deception is strong, and people often have difficulty recognizing when their actions are violent. Institutional violence can be even harder to detect because institutions are often grounded in the scapegoating process, and their founding events are frequently clouded by their own, self-serving accounts. With origin stories designed to depict institutions as sacred, people often regard violent defense of institutions as righteous and good. For example, many of those enforcing “Jim Crow” segregation laws were taught from childhood that blacks were inferior to whites and that segregation benefited both blacks and whites.

How can we distinguish between legitimate use of force and illegitimate violence? The force is more likely justifiable if the intent is to protect vulnerable individuals rather than defend “sacred” institutions. A good sign is when those using force genuinely regret any harm they cause and do their best to limit harm. In contrast, those who grab at the spoils of victory, pursue power or control, aim to restore the “dignity” of their community, or seek revenge have likely engaged in acts of violence.

Proverbs relates, “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart” (21:2), and 1 Samuel 16:7 reads, “Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” Similarly, Jesus taught, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8), and Jesus often emphasized the importance of intent (Matthew 5:28, 6:1-6, 18:35; Mark 12:42-44). We should always be uncomfortable with activities that harm other individuals. We

should question our own motives repeatedly, and we should constantly seek to view situations from the victims' perspectives.

Was Jesus ever violent? The only biblical story in which Jesus used physical force against adversaries was in the Temple when he turned over the tables of the money changers (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; John 2:14-16). Importantly, though Jesus' words and actions suggest anger, Jesus did not hurt anybody. Why did he disrupt their activities? Some believe that the money changers were cheating the pilgrims who needed to change currency to buy animals for sacrifices. It is possible that some money changers cheated unsuspecting pilgrims, but it seems unreasonable to believe that Jesus would anger the Roman authorities and the powerful Temple priests only to prevent petty crimes.

Remarkably, in John's account, Jesus drove out the animals slated for sacrifice. Therefore, I think that Jesus's sought to disrupt the sacrificial system, done in the same spirit as many later Hebrew prophets who opposed animal sacrifices.

Conflicting Views on Sacrifice

The earlier writings in the Hebrew Scriptures described human sacrifice and instructions from God concerning animal sacrifices. However, several later prophets condemned all blood sacrifices, and Jesus recalled Hosea 6:6 when he said, "Go and learn what this means 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). In this passage, Jesus defended his sharing meals with tax collectors and sinners who the people ostracized.

Similarly, in Matthew 12:5-7, Jesus replied to the priests who had criticized his disciples for plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath to eat:

Have you not read in the law how on the sabbath the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless.

Though Jesus was responding to an accusation against his disciples, I think that Jesus' comment was meant to apply to all innocent victims condemned by the priests, including the totally guiltless sacrificial an-

imals. These animals were the concern of Hosea 6:6, the passage upon which Matthew 9:13 and 12:7 is based. Further evidence that Jesus included animals among those who were condemned but guiltless was his comment “something greater than the temple is here” (Matthew 12:6) – animal sacrifices were a central function of the Temple.¹

Some have claimed that Jesus did not object to sacrifices per se but rather to those who performed sacrifices while remaining hard of heart and sinful. If this were so, it would have made more sense for Jesus to say, “I desire mercy more than sacrifice” rather than “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” Evidence that Jesus objected to all sacrificial violence comes from Jesus concurring with a scribe about what is the first commandment. The scribe said,

To love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:33).

This analysis offers insight into Romans 12:1, in which Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” The age of sacrifice had ended, and Paul wrote that we are to dedicate ourselves completely, including our bodies, to God. This passage, I think, helps us better understand Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Many people have interpreted Romans 6:23 as indicating that, as a consequence of sin, God demands the death either of the sinner or of a sacrificial substitute – and the ultimate sacrifice was Jesus. However, because Romans 12:1 refers to self-sacrifice, I do not think we should read Romans 6:23 as an indication that God desires that we sacrifice other individuals as substitutes for ourselves. Indeed, Romans 6:23 does not say that God desires death at all. The passage has made a simple and valid observation: sinful-ness leads to death. If we sin by failing to express God’s love, we fall into rivalries that lead to violence and death.

Violence and the Churches

The Hebrew Scriptures describe God’s ideal as peaceful coexistence throughout God’s creation. There was no violence in the Garden of

Eden, and Isaiah 11:6-9 prophesied a return to this harmonious state. Isaiah foresaw a time in which “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (2:4). Similarly, Jesus encouraged nonviolence (Matthew 26:52).

As Christianity evolved from a movement to reform Judaism into a distinct religion, it developed a hierarchical establishment that has sometimes lost sight of Jesus’ ministry. Those with power have been tempted to defend their own privileged positions and to promote their personal agendas, rather than to dedicate themselves to serve God by helping to heal a broken world. Churches have important religious and social functions, but there is always the danger that churches, like all institutions, can participate in victimization and scapegoating.

Girard maintained that all hierarchies have their foundations in the scapegoating process. If true, it follows that hierarchies are grounded in violence and maintained by violence, though the violent elements may be subtle or hidden. In churches and other hierarchical institutions, most disagreements between leaders and subordinates are settled without resorting to overt violence, but the ever-present threat of violence maintains the status quo.

In addition to welcoming diversity of views within a church, it is crucial to respect people of other faiths. I have no quarrel with anyone who promotes compassion and justice, regardless of their religious faith and practice. Indeed, many who behave as if they have the faith of Christ do not regard themselves as Christian.

In contradiction to Jesus’ teachings, many Christian communities have yielded to the temptation to use scapegoating as the glue that holds them together. Some churches scapegoat people, such as homosexuals or religious skeptics, by claiming that they threaten the church community. Similarly, there seems to be an element of scapegoating in many churches’ attitudes about the treatment of animals. Many churches have contrasted humanity – made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) – with animals, who supposedly have a baser nature. This might help explain why, in general, churches have been unfriendly to animals. Christian animal advocates have found that churches generally resist Christian education programs that aim to expose the massive suffering of billions of animals on factory farms. Further, many churches celebrate killing animals with social events such as pig-roasts and fish-fries, and some churches sponsor hunt clubs.

Is Peacemaking Practical?

Jesus said, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Jesus, using nonviolent means, skillfully avoided physical danger from mobs and deftly handled the theological traps set by the Pharisees. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. similarly exhibited determination tempered by prudence. He strictly observed nonviolence, which he considered essential on moral and practical grounds, even after racists bombed his home. He did not seek to become a martyr, but he understood the grave risks of his ministry.

Although Jesus suggested that peacemakers will ultimately prevail, historically they have often been victims of violence. From the martyred first century Christian pacifists to the many victimized Quakers, peacemaking people have been harassed and even killed. Often, peacemakers have incurred wrath because, by refusing to join scapegoating mobs, they have threatened to expose the injustice of the scapegoating process.

I think Jesus said “Blessed are the peacemakers” not because they will prevail in a physical sense – though sometimes they do³ – but because they prevail in a spiritual sense. Christianity is not only about practical outcomes, as illustrated by Jesus’ comment to Pilate, “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews” (John 18:36). Jesus was primarily concerned with serving God.

It is important to distinguish between being peaceful and being a peacemaker. Rulers have no quarrel with those who peacefully acquiesce, and peaceful people may avoid violence and destruction. Peaceful people can be ruthlessly exploited, but rulers will find no need to violently repress them. In contrast, peacemakers challenge the rulers and other temporal powers, and peacemakers often become victims of violence. Peacemakers know that violence underlies all unjust social arrangements because maintaining injustice requires violence against those who demand justice. In many situations, the only way to end violence is to reveal injustice and violence, but this can be dangerous work.

Jesus said that the way we live should be the means by which we spread the gospel: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). We all have the potential to be “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6), which is essentially a prophetic calling.

Chapter 11: Prophetic Witness



The Nature of Prophets

From the perspective of Girardian theory, prophecy includes exposing the scandal of “sacred” scapegoating violence. Prophets reveal what has been hidden since the foundation of the world (Matthew 13:35) – that communal cohesiveness has been bought with the blood of innocent victims. Scapegoating generates a sense of camaraderie, but the social order, grounded in violence and injustice, maintains only the appearance of peace. Prophets expose as a falsehood the “peace” and “harmony” derived from scapegoating violence, and Jeremiah declared, “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying ‘Peace, Peace’ when there is no peace” (6:14, also 8:11).

Prophets have typically witnessed or personally experienced scapegoating. This, I think, is why the Hebrew prophets typically had humble origins, which helped them empathize with victims. Prophets recognize and denounce injustice, but they do so at great peril. They threaten those with power and they undermine the myths, rituals, and taboos around which people orient their lives.

Jesus provided considerable insight into the nature of prophecy when he told the Pharisees and lawyers, “Woe to you! for you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. So you are witnesses and consent to the deeds of your fathers; for they killed them, and you build their tombs” (Luke 11:47-48). The prophets condemned killing innocent victims, and many prophets, for articulating that message, were killed themselves. Jesus denounced the Pharisees and lawyers for building tombs and celebrating the prophets’ greatness, which made it easier for the Pharisees and lawyers to ignore the prophets’ actual, challenging message.

Prophecy

Jesus said, “No prophet is acceptable in his own country” (Luke 4:24). Some have noted that people have trouble venerating someone they remember as an immature youth. Gil Bailie, offering further insight, argued that an individual becomes a prophet by virtue of being rejected.¹ The victim of ostracism (and often violence) gains an understanding of the ways in which mobs gain unity through collective violence. This is prophetic knowledge, and it requires being an outsider. To varying degrees, everyone has experienced being an outsider at times. Outsider status is greatly enhanced when a person exposes and denounces scapegoating because much of what it means to be “one of us” is to agree with the rest of the community about who should be excluded due to their “evilness” or “inferiority.” To belong to a community unified by the scapegoating process requires participation in the community’s scapegoating, which is why prophets can never fully belong to their community.

Robert C. Tannehill wrote, “The destiny of God’s prophets includes suffering and rejection, for they must speak God’s word to a blind and resistant world and must bear the brunt of this resistance.”² The scapegoating process helps explain why so many humans seem to be blind and resistant. This knowledge does not make prophecy any easier or more pleasant, but it can help prophets maintain equanimity in the face of seemingly insurmountable resistance to their message.

Because speaking with a prophetic voice can be burdensome or even dangerous, it is tempting to focus on one’s own purity and righteousness rather than social injustice. However, William Sloane Coffin noted:

Public good doesn’t automatically flow from private virtue. A person’s moral character, sterling though it may be, is insufficient to serve the cause of justice, which is to challenge the status quo, to try to make what’s legal more moral, to speak truth to power, and to take personal or concerted action against evil, whether in personal or systemic form.³

Coffin speaks of prophets of all stripes. Among Christian animal protectionists, many find that their drive to help animals is grounded in their sensitivity to animal suffering. I think this sensitivity is a gift that can give direction and meaning to our lives. But, it can also be a

burden in that we often suffer empathetically with those helpless animals abused by humans, and we often find that animal activism alienates us from family and friends. With opened eyes and ears (see Mark 8:18), we recognize animals' suffering and we reject the notion that victimizing them is righteous and just. We should not be proud or bitter about our prophetic calling – whether it seems a gift or a burden, many of us see our prophetic calling as part of our destiny.

Many people find that advocating for animals or other vulnerable, abused individuals provides a sense of satisfaction and meaning. What if we do not answer our call to prophecy? Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:28-29).

Will God punish those who disregard their prophetic destiny? I do not think so. Rather, to the degree that we reject our destiny, our lives become artificial and lose integrity and meaning. Those who deny their prophetic calling are punished by their sins, not for them. By the same token, I think that prophets who fulfill their destiny are rewarded by their faithfulness to God, not for it. The first challenge is to accept one's prophetic destiny; the next is to find creative ways to communicate one's prophetic witness to a resistant human community.

Prophecy and Creativity

People seem to have an innate desire to be creative. What makes one creative person's work great, and most people's writings, paintings, music, or other artistic creations ignored or quickly forgotten? Pop culture often presents human experience in simple terms, is readily accessible to a broad audience, and usually comforts people by reinforcing their values and beliefs. Pop culture has little lasting power, however, because it generally does not meaningfully describe people's greatest inner conflicts or their deepest spiritual longings and needs. In contrast, great art speaks to important aspects of human experience. The ancient Hebrews preserved and revered the writings of the later prophets, in part because they articulated an inspiring but challenging vision of justice and righteousness.

Often, the public resists the messages of its most insightful prophets. Communities usually reject revelation of the lies that the community wants to keep hidden, such as falsehoods related to the

scapegoating process. However, Jesus said, “The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner” (Luke 20:17; this refers to Psalm 118:22; see also Matthew 21:42 and Mark 12:10). Often people only appreciate prophets’ messages when crises force them to reconsider their culture’s myths, rituals, and taboos.

It can be difficult to recognize when we participate in scapegoating. Consequently, prophets seeking to protect victims often find it necessary to communicate subtly and indirectly, frequently using art forms such as fiction, poetry, painting, or music. Jesus used parables to express his radical ideas to a resistant audience. I also think there is a place for prose, but the appeal of prose is limited to those who are ready for its message.

Will our creative efforts bear fruit? Some will, but most will not. Each of us has a calling to prophesy, and we need to answer that call because without prophecy, nothing impedes injustice. The author of Proverbs wrote, “Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint” (Proverbs 29:18).

Many prophets “burn out” and abandon their prophetic work if they have not substantially reduced the injustices against which they have struggled. However, we are not called to save the world. We did not create the problems, and we are not obliged to fix them. Our role is to be faithful to our calling, which means doing the best we can to correct injustices, oppose victimization, and assist those who are afflicted.

Chapter 12: The Realm of God



The Realm of God

Jesus prayed for God's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Jesus sought a world of justice and peace, which I think relates to the "kingdom (or realm) of God," about which Jesus talked frequently.

Jesus said, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). This indicates that there is a spiritual as well as a worldly component to the realm of God. I do not regard the realm of God as a physical place. I see it as a sense of being connected to God and God's creation. Individually, it is a state of peace of mind; collectively, it is a state of communal harmony with mutual love, caring, and respect. It is harder to experience the realm of God while suffering, but not impossible. Stephen seemed to be at peace with God and the world even as he was being stoned: "And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' And he knelt down and cried in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'" (Acts 7:59-60).

As I read the Bible, it seems that "seeing," "entering," or "receiving" the realm of God relates to an experience that does not lend itself to words. This is why Jesus frequently said, "The kingdom of God is like . . ." and "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." I suspect that the realm of God is a state of oneness with the universe, in which the subjective "me" connects to the outside, objective world. We have difficulty comprehending the realm of God because our minds are inherently dualistic. Our minds are dualistic because we think with language, which itself is dualistic.¹ Language is dualistic because words obtain meaning from the distinction between what the words describe and what they do not describe. Words cannot describe a unitary concept that has no opposite or contrast. For example, "big" only has meaning because it is larger than "little," and we call things by names such as chair, couch, and bed on the basis of features and functions that

distinguish them from other things. Consequently, our dualistic minds struggle when trying to comprehend both God and the realm of God – singular concepts that do not have opposites.

In addition to the difficulties posed by dualistic language, I think we also find it hard to comprehend the realm of God because we experience life as discrete individuals. We do not experience what others feel, and they do not experience our feelings. This dualism between our own self and the external world seems so natural and obvious that it is difficult to grasp Jesus' state of mind, in which he perceived the boundaries between himself and God as indistinct. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30; see also 14:11). Further, Jesus blurred the distinction between himself and his disciples: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15:10). The Hebrew Scriptures seem to discourage a dualistic worldview in that God refuses to divulge God's name (Exodus 3:13-14). If God had a name, we would envision God as a distinct entity separate from the universe. The concept of the Trinity also serves to disrupt clear, distinct, dualistic boundaries, particularly because Christians generally envision the Holy Spirit as interacting with everyone (see John 14:17).

The realm of God involves an interconnected state of being. From this perspective, we would be unified with God and God's creation. Consequently, we would experience whatever we do to others as doing to ourselves. However, because we cannot transcend the boundaries of our own mind, the closest we can come to the realm of God is in relation to each other. Jesus said, "The realm of God is in the midst of you" (Luke 17:21). With Jesus, relationships should be grounded on love and involve assisting each other (Galatians 5:13; 3 John 1:5), and to illustrate this Jesus washed the disciples' feet (John 12:14).

God's Role in Suffering

As discussed in Chapter 2, there should be no injustice if God is both all-powerful and righteous. Yet, there appears to be widespread suffering and injustice, indicating that God is either not all powerful or not righteous. Let us briefly consider how some theologians have addressed this paradox.

Some deny that the world is unjust. Even though there is suffering, they maintain that this is nonetheless the best of all possible worlds.

They assert that the reason it often seems that suffering and death are unnecessary is that we have a very limited view of God's plan. If we more fully understood God's plan, we would recognize that everything is for the good. It is impossible to prove or disprove this theory, but I do not think it is reasonable. There is so much apparently unnecessary human and animal suffering in the world that it is hard to believe that a righteous, all-powerful God could not have created a better world.

One possibility is that God's notion of "the good" is very different from our own. However, if we believe that we should act according to God's will, but we only have a vague and often mistaken notion of what God regards as good, then we are ill-equipped to make sound moral decisions.

Some have maintained that God is not necessarily righteous. There is no reason, they assert, to assume that God had benevolent reasons for creating the universe and its living beings. Perhaps God derives pleasure from watching us struggle and suffer. Again, this is theoretically possible, but Rabbi Harold Kushner declared that this is not a god he would praise.² One might perform rituals to appease such a malevolent deity, but one would not love and respect such a god. Kushner maintained that God is not all powerful. Perhaps when a plane crashes, God is unable to save the kind and decent people who perish along with hateful ones.

Some people have noted that if God were to directly intervene in human affairs and violate the physical laws of nature, this would deprive humans of free will. Our praising God and our acting according to God's will are meaningful only insofar as we have free will. However, I would question God's righteousness if God permitted such massive suffering in the world primarily because God desired to receive praise and dedication from humans. Even if human free will were necessary for human existence to be meaningful, I find this an insufficient reason to justify so much suffering of humans and animals. Further, humans and animals often suffer for reasons that have little, if anything, to do with human free will, including natural disasters, random diseases, and the commonplace suffering of animals in nature.

Did God create an imperfect universe? Though I do not know God's role in creating the universe, I believe that God cares about it. Perhaps, as Kushner posited, God created a universe full of possibility that, once created, was beyond God's power to control. However, we do have the capacity to choose whether to side with victims or victimizers.

Ideological Certainty versus the Quest for Truth

It is disquieting to be uncertain about why there is suffering in the world. Further, we strongly desire definitive answers to important existential questions, such as where we came from, what happens when we die, the meaning of our lives, and how we are supposed to treat each other. In order to make a difference in the world, it is essential that we commit ourselves to what we believe, even to the point of great personal sacrifice. However, those who are certain that they know God's will are unable to learn and grow. We need to be ready to change commitments if evidence demonstrates that our actions or beliefs have been misguided.

Those manifesting ideological certainty tend to divide answers to some of the most challenging existential questions into two absolute divisions: true or false. Girardian theory indicates that such distinctions are grounded in the scapegoating process, which has generated the division between true, divinely ordained belief and false, taboo, or satanic belief. Commitment to ideological certainty favors rigid adherence to religious tenets and often represses empathy, compassion, and truth.

Because uncertainty renders people receptive to new ideas, recognizing the limits of our knowledge is crucial for gaining understanding about ourselves, our communities, and the nature of God. We need fresh perspectives because each of us has a very limited view of the world, and because our unconscious needs and fears can cloud our thinking. Together, we can correct each other's mistakes and find effective ways to serve God. As Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

If, as Christian faith teaches, God is about love, then faith communities are severely handicapped in their attempt to understand God if they are bound by the scapegoating process. Signs that this is the case include harsh, merciless, punitive laws that they attribute to God, an intolerance of "heretical" points of view, and a conviction that God loves members of their community more than the rest of God's creation. In contrast, communities guided by the faith of Christ are dedicated to love, respect, compassion, and truth (see James 3:17-18).

Because humans are fallible, I am convinced that having a sense of certainty reflects only a state of mind. Things about which we are certain might or might not be true.³

Chapter 13: Problems with Sacrificial Theologies



In an essay that can be accessed online,¹ I discuss how The Letter to the Hebrews and The Revelation to John can be seen as opposing sacrifices, even though many Christians have used these texts to support the concept of sacred violence. In this chapter, I will explain why I think the doctrine of “original sin” and certain atonement theologies have misrepresented Jesus’ ministry.

Original Sin

Throughout the ages, Christians have struggled to understand why people sin, to determine the consequences of sin, and to discern how to overcome sin. A popular contemporary Christian theory is that everyone is sinful because everyone inherits Adam’s original sin, which was Adam’s disobedience to God’s command not to eat the forbidden fruit. This theology holds that sacrifices have been needed to mollify God’s wrath at human sinfulness (see Leviticus 4-7, 16:21-22). How could people be justified in God’s eyes if they are forever tainted by “Original Sin”? The only way to redeem this sin would be to offer a “perfect” sacrifice of a victim who is without sin. Only Jesus, who was totally innocent, could satisfy God’s demand for a perfect sacrifice, making further animal sacrifices unnecessary. I will discuss difficulties with this atonement theology shortly, but first I need to look at the notion of original sin.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was central in developing the theory that everyone inherits Adam’s original sin of disobedience. Augustine maintained that human sexuality was the outward manifestation of human sinfulness, perhaps because he struggled greatly against his own sexual desires. He asserted that the powerful passions associated with sexual intercourse transmit human sinfulness to infants.² With our better understanding of the biology of inheritance, Augustine’s theory, or any theory that posits physical inheritance of Adam’s sin of disobe-

dience, seems unreasonable.

I think mimetic theory offers a more plausible framework for understanding original sin. Humans, as mimetic creations, inherently desire what others have or want, which strongly predisposes us to sin. In other words, though we do inherit a propensity to sin, we are not born into sin. We tend to sin, not because we are inherently sinful, but because we find it difficult to resist the temptations of the scapegoating process. As discussed in Chapter 2, I regard the Garden of Eden story anthropologically and as allegory, rather than historically and as literal truth. I think this story tells us that becoming human is what inclined Adam to sin.³

Another difficulty with Augustine's theory relates to his interpretation of Romans 5:12. Augustine acknowledged that he had not mastered Greek, and some scholars have argued that Augustine misunderstood the text to mean that everyone had sinned "in Adam."^{4,5} The Revised Standard Version here reads, "Therefore, as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned. . . ." This and many other English translations leave unclear whether all have sinned because Adam sinned – as in the Augustinian notion of inherited original sin – or whether all have sinned because "death spread to all men." The latter translation suggests that perennial human sinfulness is a consequence of death rather than a consequence of Adam's sin. This view accords with Becker's observations about the consequences of death anxiety on human behavior.⁶

A Girardian reading of Romans 5:12 suggests that the sin that Adam introduced to the world was scapegoating. Because humans experience acquisitive mimetic desire, Adam and Eve fell into mimetic rivalry with God when they desired the forbidden fruit that God seemed to value above all else. A consequence of the sin of participating in the scapegoating process is death, beginning with Adam and Eve's banishment from paradise to a world of struggle and scarcity, followed by Cain's murdering Abel and the countless subsequent murders.

Christianity and the Roman Empire

As Christianity evolved from a small Jewish movement into a major world religion, its history played an important role in its theology. The relationships between early Christians and the Roman Empire have had

important implications for contemporary Christian thought and belief. Although the Roman authorities initially persecuted the Christians for not worshipping the Roman emperor,⁷ Constantine legalized Christianity in 313, and a series of decrees starting in 381 made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. With these changes, the Church became a powerful political force.

Among other things, these political changes profoundly influenced Christians' understanding of personal and political freedom. Elaine Pagels noted that "the majority of Christian converts of the first four centuries regarded the proclamation of moral freedom, grounded in Genesis 1-3, as effectively synonymous with 'the gospel.'"⁸ The Genesis account described God giving Adam and Eve dominion over themselves, as well as over the rest of creation. Although God had expelled Adam and Eve from Eden after they misused their freedom, God did not strip people of free will. The early Christians held that moral freedom empowered them to control their internal passions, such as greed and sexual desire, and to resist external authorities, such as the oppressive Roman government. Gregory of Nyssa wrote,

Preeminent among all is the fact that we are free from any necessity, and not in bondage to any power, but have decision in our own power as we please; for virtue is a voluntary thing, subject to no dominion. Whatever is the result of compulsion and force cannot be virtue.⁹

The Romans could torture and kill Christians, but the Romans could not strip Christians of their freedom to practice and believe as they chose.¹⁰ Paul wrote,

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. . . . For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another (Galatians 5:1, 13).

As the Church gained political power, Christianity's emphasis on moral freedom gradually faded. In its place, Christian doctrine focused on eliminating sin, by force if necessary. Augustine's concept of original sin, which manifested itself in uncontrollable sexual desires, accorded well with this new outlook. If humans were slaves to sin, then salvation required external forces to eradicate the sinful practices to which

people were drawn. In other words, Augustine's formulation of original sin provided a theological basis for a Church/Empire alliance. It seems that Jesus did not categorically oppose Roman civil authority. He said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25; see also Matthew 22:21). However, Jesus denounced those earthly Jewish religious authorities who were bereft of love, compassion, and mercy. I am confident that Jesus would have decried the Church's political allegiance with Rome, which permitted repression and violence "in the name of God." Church leaders now had the power to crush anyone who threatened their authority. During the fourth century, as the Church gained power, it persecuted and eradicated "heretical" Christian communities and destroyed their literature.

The alignment of the orthodox Christian church with the Roman Empire significantly modified Christianity's understanding of Jesus' ministry and death. As Douglas John Hall observed, the official religion of Roman empire needed to be a glorious, powerful figure, not a crucified Jew.¹¹ The Bible depicts Jesus at God's right hand (Matthew 26:64; Mark 16:19; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33, 7:56; Romans 8:34), which the early Christians saw as a sign of Jesus' righteousness. However, the Romans and their church allies regarded this as a sign of authoritarian kingship in the dominating, Roman mold.

Christians have always struggled to understand the meaning of Jesus' death, and Christendom's alliance with the Roman Empire favored theologies in which Jesus vanquished the forces of evil rather than theologies that described Jesus teaching followers how to avoid those evil forces. There are many possible ways to understand the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, and numerous "atonement theologies" have competed for the hearts and minds of Christians. Christian history helps explain why different atonement theologies prevailed at different times.

Atonement Theologies

Jesus' death raised theological problems for early Christians. If he were really the son of God who could work miracles, how could he be humiliated, tortured, and murdered? Why did he not come down and walk away from the cross? Christians, in struggling with these questions, have proposed various atonement theologies that suggest that Jesus died to atone for human misdeeds. I will first review leading atone-

ment theologies,¹² all of which I find theologically, sociologically, and politically problematic. I will then describe J. Denny Weaver's atonement theology, which I find very appealing, in part because it is consistent with the notion that God is about love and mercy and not about violence and scapegoating.

Christus victor (Christ the victor) was the predominant atonement theology of the early Church, and historically two forms have been popular. In the ransom version, the devil once held human souls in captivity. God ransomed the release of human souls by offering up Jesus as a ransom payment, and Jesus' death appeared to be a victory for the devil. But God had deceived the devil, and in raising Jesus from the dead, there was victory for Jesus and humanity.

Another *Christus victor* theology depicted a cosmic battle in which Jesus was killed during a battle between God and the devil. The Resurrection constituted a victory for God and placed God as ruler of the universe.

These *Christus victor* theologies are not popular today. The ransom idea posits that the devil had the power and authority to demand a ransom of God, which, critics have argued, would belittle God. Similarly, the cosmic battle idea uncomfortably depicts the devil as having sufficient power to kill God's son.

The moral influence theory holds that Jesus' death was an act of God that demonstrated that God loves humanity so much that God was willing to give up his most precious possession, his son, for humanity. This dramatic, loving act would get sinful humanity's attention and lead us toward a more righteous path. Few people adhere to this theology today, which holds that God engineered the death of one child, Jesus, in order to save the rest of God's children, us. Would we ever approve of a parent having one innocent child killed to teach a lesson to sinful siblings?

In 1098, Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur Deus Homo* articulated a satisfaction atonement theology that has significantly influenced Christian thought for nearly a millennium. Anselm maintained that humanity's sin had offended God, and Jesus' death was necessary to satisfy God's honor. Human sin had upset the moral order in the universe, and Jesus' death was necessary to restore order. The Protestant reformers modified this theology with the notion that Jesus' death was necessary because divine law required that sin must be punished. Humanity's sin, which relates back to Adam and Eve's "original sin," had created an imbalance between good and evil in the universe, and punishment was nec-

essary to restore balance. Jesus submitted to and bore the punishment that all humans, as sinners, should have received. This theology, which is sometimes called substitutionary atonement theology, is popular in many contemporary Protestant churches, particularly in Evangelical churches.

When considering satisfaction and substitutionary atonement theologies, we should ask: who killed Jesus? If the mob, the Roman authorities, or the high priests were responsible for killing Jesus, then one would come to the awkward conclusion that the evildoers – not Jesus – were actually fulfilling the divine mission to substitute an innocent victim for sinful humanity. Murder by humans had somehow delivered humanity from sin. Alternatively, God might have killed or orchestrated Jesus' death. If we consider Anselm's satisfaction theology, in which Jesus' death was needed to satisfy God's honor, we come to the bizarre proposition that God was responsible for Jesus' death to satisfy God's own honor.

Substitutionary atonement theology focuses not on God's honor but on the belief that God demands that all sin must be punished. This theology has several difficulties. It holds that there are times that God wants parts of God's creation harmed, it contradicts the view of God as loving and compassionate, and it assumes that sinners are fully culpable. The last item is particularly dubious because many factors beyond human control influence the choices people make, including their natural temperament; their early childhood experiences; and the values of their parents, other people, and institutions that have shaped their worldviews.

In addition, substitutionary atonement theology assumes that justice and righting of wrongs involve some kind of retribution. According to this framework, the problem with sin is that it causes an imbalance – a disturbance of the moral order of the universe. Given humanity's depravity and sinfulness, the only way to restore balance is through the most severe punishment – death. However, such a view separates God's justice from God's forgiveness. This separation is both theologically and socially problematic because it encourages people to choose to either focus on God's justice or God's forgiveness, depending on their own temperament or on the moral issue at hand. When there is relative peace and well-being, people can choose to abide by the dictates of a loving and forgiving God. When there is social unrest or a crisis, people can revert to the image of God as wrathful

and vengeful.

Defenders of substitutionary atonement theology often point to certain biblical passages¹³ and to the ancient Hebrew sacrifices¹⁴ as proof that God desires blood sacrifices for sins. If we are to regard Jesus' death as a sacrifice in the context of the Jewish sacrificial cult, then it is important to consider the purpose of the atonement sacrifices for the Hebrews. The ancient Hebrews did not regard sacrifices for sin as designed to appease God's wrath – a notion that is implicit in substitutionary atonement theology. James D.G. Dunn noted that the act of sacrifice denoted by the Hebrew verb *kipper* aimed to eradicate the sin or the sinner's propensity to sin.¹⁵ (*Kipper* relates to *Yom Kippur*, the holiest day of the Hebrew calendar and means "Day of Atonement.")

Human values, beliefs, and experiences have influenced the development of all atonement theologies. A thorough examination of any given atonement theology must include an assessment of the human context in which the theology evolved.

J. Denny Weaver noted that Anselm's satisfaction atonement framework has roots in the medieval worldview. The feudal king's power resided in a belief that the king had divine authority. To offend the king was tantamount to offending God. Therefore, those who dishonored the king had to be punished to restore the moral order. Weaver concluded, "Any and all versions of satisfaction atonement . . . assume the violence of retribution or justice based on punishment, and depend on God-induced and God-directed violence."¹⁶ With God involved in violence and punishment, it becomes easier for Christians to justify their own violence and punishment "in the name of God." Some might argue that, because God's wrath has been fully satisfied by the sacrifice of Jesus, God is no longer wrathful. Consequently, substitutionary atonement theology might be compatible with an image of God as one who has become purely loving, compassionate, and merciful. However, this view presumes that God was fundamentally wrathful when Jesus was alive and teaching about love.

Satisfaction and substitutionary atonement theologies treat sin as a legal problem – humanity's offense against God – rather than as a social problem.¹⁷ They do not regard sinfulness in terms of society's institutions or events of human history (other than original sin). Consequently, these theologies do not challenge unjust human institutions, making it easier for Christians to countenance injustice.

With the rise of Anselm's satisfaction atonement theology, Christianity's focus changed from what Jesus did and taught to what was

needed to preserve Christian society. Because Christians have regarded the Church as the embodiment of God, and because religious authorities have often taught that the Church is the vehicle through which people gain eternal salvation, defending the Church has often taken precedence over defending vulnerable individuals. Indeed, there have been many times when kings and other despots have invoked the notion of Christian society to serve their own interests. When Church and state authorities have collaborated, they have frequently become the powers and principalities that Paul identified as the enemies of God (Ephesians 6:12). Although Jesus taught that we should show love and mercy in all our relationships, satisfaction atonement theologies have changed the focus of sin from injustice against individuals to offense against God and “God’s Church.” Consequently, this focus has made it easier for Christianity to accommodate slavery, subjugation of women, cruelty to animals, and other unjust arrangements. In addition, it has facilitated financial, sexual, and other sins by church authorities.

Some social reformers have expressed concern that substitutionary atonement theology makes it easier to neglect victims. This theology sees Jesus’ death as satisfying the penalty for humanity’s sinfulness. Now that human sin is no longer a barrier to justification before God, one may focus on one’s own individual salvation and pay little attention to social justice. Although Christian doctrine generally holds that “saved” Christians naturally reflect God’s love, many Christians, confident of their justification before God and therefore convinced that God is guiding their moral sentiments, can believe that selfish and patently unjust behavior represents God’s will.

Social reformers have pointed out that both satisfaction and substitutionary atonement theologies portray Jesus as innocent yet voluntarily submitting to suffering. This has often been an obstacle to people who suffer as a consequence of unjust social arrangements because church authorities have often told victims of domestic or other abuse that, “in imitation of Christ,” they should submit to the mistreatment in the same way that Jesus accepted his tragic destiny.

Additionally, these theologies are problematic in that they adopt the logic of Caiaphas who, in trying to convince the chief priests and Pharisees to execute Jesus, said, “It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (John 11:50). These theologies implicitly affirm the logic of scapegoating violence that justifies harming innocent individuals. If that were the case, Christianity would differ little from ancient religions that held

that gods demand sacrificial violence.

Finally, satisfaction and substitutionary atonement theologies focus on Jesus' death. They do not require a theology about his life, teachings, or resurrection. Contemplating the meaning of Jesus' death through a Girardian lens promotes the view that God wants us to love each other and to cease scapegoating innocent individuals. We can miss this message if we divorce Jesus' death from the rest of his ministry.

Narrative *Christus Victor*

As discussed in Chapter 8, satanic desires for power have undermined the realm of God. Revelation equates the violent and rapacious Roman Empire with Satan,¹⁸ and countless powers and principalities have assumed this role throughout history. Weaver suggested that the *Christus victor* framework lost favor "when the church came to support the world's social order, to accept the intervention of political authorities in churchly affairs, and to look to political authorities for support and protection."¹⁹ In other words, when the early church, which had no military or political clout, aligned with the powers and principalities that many people recognized as satanic, it sought atonement theologies that removed Satan from the picture.

However, we have seen that the moral influence, satisfaction, and substitutionary atonement theologies that have replaced *Christus victor* theologies are themselves problematic. In defense of *Christus victor*, satanic forces, which I relate to the scapegoating process, are very real. They militate against the realization of the realm of God in which all creation lives in peace and harmony. There is a need for humanity to atone for the sins that reflect human, satanic desires, and Weaver articulated an atonement theology that depicts Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as the means by which sinful humanity can become reconciled with God. He suggested the term "narrative *Christus victor*" because it relies heavily on the Gospel and Revelation narratives.

Weaver's framework portrays Jesus neither as a passive victim nor as resisting his victimization by struggling to prevent the powers and principalities from persecuting him. If Jesus had been passive, the mob would have concluded that he agreed with their verdict that he deserved punishment. If he had resisted his fate, the mob, unable to see its own violence, would have seen his actions as proof of guilt. Either way, he would have been yet another victim in the endless series of scapegoats.

Instead, he actively challenged the satanic structures by demonstrating, in word and deed, God's plan for universal love. He befriended and assisted a broad range of outcasts – victims of the scapegoating process. Doing so violated taboos grounded on the scapegoating process and challenged corrupt and unjust authorities, and Jesus was aware that these actions could prompt the mob and the authorities to conspire in his torture and execution. In life, Jesus made the realm of God visible by manifesting love. In death, the Resurrection established Jesus as the ultimate victor in the conflict between good and evil.

In narrative *Christus victor*, God's role is not to engineer Jesus' murder or even to tacitly condone it. Superficially, satanic powers often seem to triumph by killing peacemakers such as Jesus. However, the Resurrection marks the ultimate victory of Jesus. In narrative *Christus victor*, faith in the Resurrection is tantamount to faith that Jesus was innocent, that God sides with those who express love and peace rather than those who engage in violence and scapegoating, and that the realm of God will ultimately prevail. The divided house in which satanic forces try to destroy each other will eventually collapse, and creation will be reconciled to God's original intentions for a harmonious world (Mark 3:23-26; Luke 11:17-18). Christians who hold this faith can be inspired to dedicate themselves to serve God. If we do so, we can atone for the satanic sinfulness that has enticed us to sin.

Chapter 14: Contemporary Issues



The Judeo-Christian tradition seems to have grasped the insights of Girardian theory, even though the theory was formulated using the secular social sciences. Consequently, Christians might find common ground with each other and with secularists by applying Girard's insights to divisive contemporary issues. Whether or not this common ground resolves these issues, it can be a basis for mutual understandings and respectful, productive conversations.

Abortion

One particularly contentious issue has been abortion. I agree with opponents of abortion that the term “pro-choice” seems to trivialize this issue. However, I object when antiabortionists use the term “pro-life” and then limit their concerns to unborn humans. Christianity teaches that all creation matters to God. Therefore, those who maintain that we should respect the right to life of unborn humans should do the same for animals.

Opposition to abortion is not the same as making abortion illegal. Criminalizing abortion is not always the most humane, just, or efficient way to reduce or eliminate it. Other possible approaches include moral persuasion, addressing factors that lead to unwanted pregnancies, and improving social conditions in ways that make raising children more manageable.

Even if one regards protecting unborn humans as extremely important, few abortion opponents regard it as the only or even the most important priority. Other considerations that can conflict with the rights of unborn humans include the health of the mother, particularly if a pregnancy threatens her life; and military defense, which sometimes results in the killing of innocent civilians, including pregnant women.

Often, unwanted pregnancies result from victimization of women, including rape and incest, and sometimes men force women to

have abortions. Criminalizing abortion can further victimize such women by exposing them to imprisonment or life-threatening illegal abortions. Unsafe abortions performed by non-medical personnel kill 22,800-31,000 women annually.¹ Though women suffer from criminalization of abortion, it appears to have little effect on overall abortion rates. It is difficult to gauge abortion rates accurately, but the rates in countries where abortion is illegal seem similar to those of countries where it is legal.²

In essence, criminalizing abortion almost always scapegoats women because men are also responsible for the pregnancy, and because men share with women responsibility for the social conditions that make many abortions seem necessary. Consequently, I think that both unborn humans and adults have legitimate concerns that often conflict with each other. Therefore, attempts to address the complex personal and social issues related to abortion should involve love and compassion, and there is merit in former President Bill Clinton's dictum that abortion should be safe, legal, and rare.

Women's Issues

Many women's advocates have rightly identified the injustices and harm associated with patriarchy, but patriarchy does not exist only to serve male privilege. Anthropologically, patriarchy has helped maintain order by defining social roles. For example, men might hunt or earn a paycheck, while women raise the children and manage the household. Clearly defining social roles can help get needed tasks done and can help maintain a sense of social order and stability. This benefit might account for the frequency with which women embrace patriarchy and oppose women's rights.

According to Girardian theory, patriarchy, like all hierarchies, has its roots in the sacrificial process. Jesus repeatedly undermined unjust social hierarchies in his interactions with women, people with infirmities, and social outcasts. Christianity teaches that everyone is equal in the eyes of God. Therefore, we should have equal consideration for everyone's physical and emotional needs, and we should love our neighbors as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; James 2:8). Such an attitude is essential if we are to promote the realm of God "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Whether or not men and women assume traditional social roles, jus-

tice calls for permitting people to live outside cultural norms if they so choose, as long as they do not harm other individuals.

As Rev. J. R. Hyland noted, Jesus manifested both archetypical male and female attributes.³ The male principle, Hyland argued, involves action and overcoming, and the female principle features caregiving and concern. Though all people have innate desires to display degrees of both principles, cultures have often discouraged men from manifesting the female principle and women from exhibiting the male principle. However, action and overcoming without caregiving and concern easily leads to violence and destructiveness, and caregiving and concern without action and overcoming does not prevent violence and destructiveness. Jesus repeatedly showed caregiving and concern in his dealings with his disciples, friends, and even strangers. And, he also displayed action and overcoming, such as his defense of the adulteress (John 8:3-11), his confrontation with the heartless scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:13-29; Luke 11:42-43), and his turning over the money changers' tables and driving out the animals in the Temple (Matthew 21:12; Mark 11:15; John 2:15).

Many women's advocates have focused attention on the problem of male violence against women. One source of this violence relates to men's ambivalence toward women.⁴ Although men generally desire relationships with women to meet social and sexual needs, many men resent feeling emotionally and physically dependent on women. The effect on self-esteem can breed resentment. Men's conflicting feelings of desire and resentment can lead to violence.

Blaming men entirely for gender-related violence does not fully address the roots of the problem, nor does blaming women for manipulating men's desires. The challenge is to find sources of self-esteem that do not prompt men and women to scapegoat each other. As I have argued, adopting the faith of Christ is a Christian approach to this problem.

A final observation is that some women blame men for violence in general. Undoubtedly men perpetrate most acts of physical violence, but women contribute to violence in several ways. First, many women do participate in acts of violence, particularly against individuals weaker than themselves, including other women, children, and animals. Second, when angry at someone stronger than themselves, women can sometimes enlist men to perform violent acts on their behalf. Third, women can injure others emotionally, using words and actions to humiliate other individuals. Women need self-esteem as much as men do,

though their means of gaining self-esteem and of scapegoating often differ from those of men.

Social and Psychological Promiscuity

Many people have rejected religion, partly because science now provides adequate answers to many questions about the universe. Another reason is that religious authorities have engaged in unethical behavior or have resisted social justice, even though the spiritual founders of many of the world's religions, including Christianity, struggled against social injustice. Indeed, it is possible that Judeo-Christian scriptures and traditions have helped us recognize and resist the scapegoating process.

Many people who reject religion ground their ethics in secular humanism, which has called for more equal consideration of humans. Nonetheless, secular humanists have, in general, resisted applying their egalitarian principles to animals, even though humans and many animals have similar capacities to experience pain and pleasure.⁵

Commonly, secular humanists and other modern thinkers reject traditional taboos as human-made and designed to facilitate exploitation. However, without taboos to direct social values and behaviors, many people have found it difficult to orient their lives. This can lead to what Gil Bailey called "psychological promiscuity,"⁶ in which people are receptive to a wide range of beliefs, values, and practices. Such people are particularly prone to mimetic influences from friends, relatives, and celebrities, and they change their views, lifestyles, and religions frequently. When promiscuity is seen in this light, one may regard sexual promiscuity as one possible manifestation of psychological promiscuity. Without traditional controls (i.e., taboos) to focus powerful human sexual desires, people can become sexually promiscuous. Such promiscuity can be, but is not always, psychologically unsatisfying and/or socially disruptive.

Nearly all of us manifest psychological promiscuity from time to time. We tend to seek new experiences and challenges, partly because we are naturally curious creatures, and partly because we have difficulty finding our need for self-esteem and self-worth fulfilled by our work, our activities, and our relationships. The difficulty in attaining sufficient self-esteem to quell mortality anxieties encourages us to find ways to feel that we are better than other people. Consequently, many of us de-

rive pleasure from watching dysfunctional people and relationships on certain television shows; gossiping about the missteps and misfortunes of family, friends, and neighbors; and engaging in exploitative sexual and other relationships. However, such pleasures tend to be ephemeral and, because they cannot address the source of our anxieties, they are not very satisfying. Psychological promiscuity is not inherently sinful, but it can lead to sin.

With the many challenges and struggles that accompany human existence, it is often hard to follow Jesus' example of love, compassion, and mercy. Bailie noted that we should not try to avoid the influences of other people. There is a difference between psychological promiscuity, which is largely unconscious, and consciously choosing to learn from other people.⁷ As mimetic creations, we cannot help being influenced by others. But, to avoid harmful psychological promiscuity, we need a set of mutually agreed-upon standards. They include honoring commitments, helping others in need, and showing appreciation for the kindness and generosity of others. For Christians, Jesus' life and teachings should inform our standards, and our religious communities should promote them. Our communities should enforce only those standards that prevent harming others. Otherwise, there tends to be scapegoating.

Homosexuality

Many Christians believe that the Bible unequivocally condemns homosexuality,⁸ and opposition to homosexuality is a major focus of many Christian churches today. Other Christians have argued that supposedly anti-homosexual passages, if understood in context, do not categorically condemn the practice.⁹ Some have claimed that the Bible condemns unrestrained sexuality and abusive sexual relationships, but not homosexuality per se. It is remarkable that, although the Gospel narratives relate Jesus condemning a wide range of activities, there is no mention of him denouncing homosexuality.

Many people who find themselves attracted to members of their own sex have suffered social isolation or even physical harm, even though a loving relationship between same-sex people does not victimize anyone. Given that so many other human activities clearly harm God's creation, and given that having a homosexual orientation is clearly not a choice, why have Christians focused so much attention on homosexuality?

One likely reason is that homosexuality seems to violate sexual taboos. We know from the scapegoating process that violating taboos, even if no one is harmed, can engender communal fear of chaos. Another possibility is that many people repress their feelings of same-sex attraction. They convince themselves and others that they do not harbor homosexual feelings by expressing disregard or hatred for homosexuals. A third reason for strong anti-homosexual sentiments is that homosexuals are convenient scapegoats for social disharmony, and some Christian leaders have blamed homosexuals for the breakdown of the family unit.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, pastors who have railed against homosexuality have often been far less vocal about deceitful adultery and divorce, which are far more common and generally more socially disruptive.

Human Sexuality

Human sexuality involves much more than biological drives. Acquisitive mimetic desires and rivalries strongly shape sexual desires. Because relatively few people have access to sexual activity with the most attractive partners, there is great potential for widespread injured self-esteem as well as other unpleasant feelings such as loneliness. In the 1960s, many people encouraged “free love,” which involved relatively indiscriminate, promiscuous sex. However, many found such promiscuity unsatisfying because the identity of sexual partners generally matters to people, and people are usually concerned about the sexual activity of their principle partner.

Rev. Britton Johnson observed that we cannot be “right” about human sexuality; we can only be less wrong. He asserted, “The mimetic forces swirling around sexuality produce all kinds of madness: objectification of attractive people; contempt for unattractive ones; competition for partners; deceptions about our motivations . . .”¹¹

I regard the biblical teachings about sexuality as similar to biblical rules pertaining to human violence and animal sacrifices. Many activities that the Bible permits are compromises between ideal relationships and what imperfect human beings are capable of doing. The Bible acknowledges that even committed relationships fall short of perfection. Paul wrote, “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with pas-

sion” (1 Corinthians 7:8-9). It appears that Jesus also saw marriage as imperfect. He taught that in the Resurrection, where human relationships are presumably ideal, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25).

Human relationships, particularly those in which there is sexual activity, involve restrictions and taboos that, according to Girardian theory, are grounded in the scapegoating process. Biblical standards serve to reduce, but cannot possibly eliminate, the mimetic rivalries that cause great human misery. As Johnson noted, “Heterosexual and homosexual alike, married or celibate, we are all sexually broken.”¹² As with competition for sexual partners, competition for wealth can divide communities, and Jesus gave few topics more attention than money and wealth.

Abundance versus Scarcity

American culture, with a tradition of individualism and laissez-faire capitalism, teaches that we should regard life as a struggle to obtain scarce resources. Many people see competition for scarce resources as a zero-sum game – as one person gets more, roughly that much less is available to everyone else. There seem to be analogies in nature, in which food and other necessities are limited and animals struggle to survive and to reproduce.

Jesus taught that God provides enough for everyone. He said, “Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!” (Luke 12:24) Does this mean that God provides enough for everyone? Everyday experience would have taught the disciples that both people and animals sometimes go hungry or even die from deprivation.

I think Jesus held that God cares about everyone, and not worrying about scarcity is important in generating loving relationships with each other and with the world at large. Our fear of physical discomfort and death prompts us to hoard essential resources, contributing substantially to scarcity. We have such concerns because we tend to put our priorities in the wrong place. Jesus said to his disciples, “Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing” (Luke 12:22-23). Similarly, Jesus said, “For what does it profit a man,

to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Mark 8:36).

Other passages take up this theme. Jesus said, “Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). Then, Jesus told the parable of the rich fool who hoarded possessions, and God rebuked the man, saying that such possessions are temporary and unfulfilling (Luke 12:16-21). The Hebrew Scriptures also express this wisdom. Isaiah declared, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” (55:2)

Insatiable human acquisitive mimetic desires often result in scarcity. In contrast, Jesus’ teachings about love and sharing assured abundance, and he said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Wealth versus Poverty

Jesus showed particular concern for poor people. Unlike the general view of his day, Jesus did not regard poverty as a sign of divine judgment. Rather, he considered poverty a consequence of human activity. Therefore, Jesus said, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me . . . as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (Matthew 25:40, 45).

In our society, many people seek wealth as a mimetic desire and as a hedge against the vicissitudes of fortune. However, focusing on gaining wealth distracts us from serving God’s creation. Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and mammon [wealth]” (Luke 16:13). This accords with 1 John 3:17, which reads, “But if any one has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” The author of 1 Timothy 6:10 wrote, “For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs.”

Christian faith encourages us to view the world as bountiful, certainly in terms of God’s love and concern, and possibly in terms of resources. However, it is impossible for everyone to be wealthy because wealth is a relative term. In order for some people to be wealthy, other people must be poor. However, everyone can be wealthy in a spiritual sense, and one way is to feel connected to a God of unlimited love. I am convinced that spiritual well-being addresses fundamen-

tal human needs more than material well-being, provided that basic biological needs have been met.

The ecological sciences presume that a struggle for survival is inevitable. Malthus showed that exponential population growth invariably outstrips food supplies that, at best, increase arithmetically.¹³ However, Jesus said that we should dedicate ourselves to God, not to obtaining food: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4; see also Luke 4:4). If we align our desires with God’s, we help reconcile creation to the harmonious world God intended (Genesis 1; Isaiah 11:6-9). This desire encourages us to limit our consumption and to share with others, confounding the “law” of nature that food supplies invariably become scarce.

Jesus said, “So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). There are some people who share their good fortune over time. Having material possessions, for them, is a form of stewardship rather than a means of power and control. If they were to divest themselves of everything, their long-term ability to help those in need would diminish. Nevertheless, having possessions can be a stumbling block to the realm of God. Wealth substantially reduces our fear of hunger and the other hazards of poverty. Therefore, even if our aim is not to maximize our wealth, having wealth makes it more difficult for us to empathize with poor people and everyone else who is weak and vulnerable. In addition, it is tempting to use wealth to satisfy our own superfluous desires rather than to address the needs of weak and vulnerable individuals. In light of this, it makes sense that Jesus said, “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23)¹⁴ This is likely one reason that the early Christian community “had all things in common” (Acts 2:44-47).¹⁵

Animal Issues

Many people do not know how much animals suffer in the food, fur, research, and other industries because animal exploitation industries hide their crimes against God’s creatures.¹⁷ Regarding those who choose to remain unaware, serving God faithfully requires mindfulness, and intentional ignorance is no excuse.

Among those who are aware, many claim that animal issues are

irrelevant compared to human concerns. However, simple lifestyle choices can easily and substantially reduce a person's complicity in animal abuse. It seems that those who decide not to take these easy steps have chosen to satisfy their personal desires for foods, clothing, and other amenities derived from animals rather than show compassion for all living beings. The Bible permits using animals for essential human needs, but it lends much more support for slavery (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-25; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-25) than for animal mistreatment.

Although a complete review of the biblical arguments for and against animal protectionism is beyond the scope of this book, many people defend human tyranny over animals by citing Genesis 1:26, in which God gives Adam dominion over the animals. Such an interpretation of "dominion" is at odds with Genesis 1:29-30, which depicts all creatures eating plants rather than each other; with the notion that Jesus gave his life to make peace and to reconcile "all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Colossians 1:20); with Deuteronomy 17:14-20, in which God promises to choose a king for the Hebrews whose dominion over the people will involve service to the people and not pursuit of personal pleasures or wealth; and with Psalm 72, which describes how a righteous king should exercise benevolent dominion over all the lands.

Because most forms of animal abuse have become institutionalized and efficiently mechanized, and because wealthy societies can afford more luxuries such as meat and furs, humanity causes far more animal suffering and death today than in the past. Tragically, the massive abuses of factory farming now occur throughout the world, including in developing countries.¹⁶

Contemporary treatment of animals contrasts sharply with the biblical description of God's ideal in the first two chapters of Genesis, in which God created animals to be companions and helpers (Genesis 2:18):

So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field (2:19-20).

Adam did not specifically name the species or the type of animal. He

named every living creature individually. We give individual names to those about whom we care.¹⁸ In contrast, humans hardly ever give individual names to those animals slated for mistreatment and slaughter. Actually, humans apply the generic names of routinely abused animals, such as “chicken” or “pig,” as epithets of contempt for people they do not like. Such use of animal names facilitates their mistreatment.¹⁹

Callousness toward animals has had tragic consequences for both humans and animals. Reminiscent of karma, many of the greatest threats to our well-being relate directly or indirectly to humanity’s collective mistreatment of animals. Much disease in the West results from eating animal products.²⁰ Animal agribusiness contributes substantially to global warming, pollution, species extinctions, and other components of the growing environmental crisis, and animal agriculture squanders dwindling resources upon which our society depends.²¹ Animal agriculture also contributes to world hunger because most calories and proteins are lost when farmed animals convert the plant foods they eat into flesh, dairy, and eggs.²²

Intensive animal agriculture also promotes the transfer of infectious organisms from animals to people, increasing the risk of pandemics.²³ Further, farmers’ overuse of antibiotics to promote rapid growth leads to antibiotic resistance among microorganisms.²⁴

Regarding animal experimentation, even if it were true that the practice alleviated human disease, the implicit ends-justifies-the-means mindset contributes to callousness and heartlessness toward other humans. Indeed, Roberta Kalechofsky has thoroughly documented the relationship between animal experimentation and unethical human experimentation. The mindset that places knowledge above morality led to abuses of humans, including Nazi and Japanese experiments during World War II, the American Tuskegee Syphilis Study from 1932-1972, and U.S. government-sponsored radiation experiments on unsuspecting citizens.²⁵ Contemporary safeguards have helped protect human subjects in the West, but disenfranchised people everywhere are at risk as long as our culture endorses activities that countenance abuse of vulnerable individuals. I think that the mindset that disregards animal victims is the same mindset that disregards human victims.²⁶

Perhaps the most worrisome effect of animal abuse, from the standpoint of human well-being, is its effect on our ability to coexist peacefully. Members of larger communities, such as cities or nations, do not know well the character of most people with whom they interact socially and financially. People must abide by standards of decency, or

there will be chaos that, ultimately, results in violence. For starters, we should not condone victimizing vulnerable individuals. Yet, our society countenances pervasive animal abuse in food, clothing, entertainment, medical research, product testing, and other industries.

The only way to reconcile standards of decency among humans with indecency toward animals is to invoke the scapegoating process. People tend to justify the mistreatment of animals by falsely ascribing contemptible attributes to animals. However, empowering the scapegoating process makes it much easier for people to mistreat other humans who are not seen as members of their own group or tribe. Just as with animal abuse, this requires believing lies about the attributes of the other group. Indeed, communal belief in the lies about the “other” binds the community. Paradoxically, the more outlandish the lies, the more they bind the community because claiming to believe things that are obvious untrue signals loyalty to the group over loyalty to truth. Of course, communities built on lies are unstable, and it is easy to promulgate lies about “apostates,” for example those who question the authority of the group’s leader(s).

Environmentalism and Sustainability

The psalmist wrote, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (24:1). This is why God’s instruction to Adam to till and keep the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15) is a sacred calling. However, humans have not been responsible stewards of God’s creation.

World temperatures are rising, resulting in climate change and more extreme weather events; land, water, and energy resources are diminishing; and species are going extinct at alarming rates. Many people, troubled by these developments, have favored modest lifestyle adjustments, such as driving smaller cars and recycling. While Christians are called to make large sacrifices, if necessary, in service to God, few people seem willing to change their lifestyles significantly, even though we are faced with growing environmental and sustainability crises.

To illustrate, rarely do we hear environmental groups call for moving toward a plant-based diet.²⁷ This strategy may be financially prudent in that it does not offend meat-eating donors, but failure to encourage a plant-based diet profoundly undermines environmentalists’ stated goals.

Moving toward a plant-based diet almost always reduces our footprint on the earth²⁸ because animal agriculture is a leading cause of depletion of resources, pollution, topsoil erosion, and global warming.²⁹

Science versus Religion

Are science and religion compatible? Perhaps they are because science focuses on questions regarding facts about the universe while religion focuses on metaphysical questions, such as the meaning of life. This simple formulation is problematic, however. The attention of scientists is invariably drawn to subjects that they find meaningful, and religion is invariably grounded on scientific standards, such as evidence for the validity of miracles and the ability of religious texts to explain current events and to predict future events.

One of religion's principal functions is to generate community. In fact, the word "religion" has its roots in the Latin word *ligare*, which means to bind together. As discussed in chapter 1, Girardian theory posits that communities are grounded on the scapegoating process, which generate the myths, rituals, and taboos around which people orient their lives. Tragically, these myths, rituals, and taboos can encourage kind-hearted people to participate in violent and/or unjust acts. Uncritical allegiance to religious tenets can result in direct or indirect harm to innocent individuals by religious people who are taught to suppress their natural kindness.

Institutional science is not immune to the scapegoating process because scientists, like other humans, often seek power and prestige. However, science tends to differ from religion in one crucial aspect. Scientists should never claim certainty. Those who do claim certainty are ideologues or religious believers disguised as scientists. Science's admission of fallibility creates opportunities for anyone to challenge scientific theories and correct bad ideas. This is why science has been so successful in the last few centuries at understanding the world and thereby generating better ways to live in the world, including effective medicines, efficient travel, and access to myriad consumer products.

An important attribute of science is that people from diverse backgrounds can find common ground for dialogue and for discerning good

public policy by agreeing on scientific evidence. People will always disagree on matters related to values, but if they cannot agree on matters of fact then it becomes impossible to have a common ground for discussion. Without such a common ground, it is difficult to generate mutual respect. Mutual respect is crucial for peaceful coexistence among people in a pluralist democracy such as the United States. If there is no mutual respect, people are inclined to resolve disputes with violence, particularly if they believe that those with whom they disagree threaten the future of their community.

The Challenge for Our Churches

Many people expect our churches to promote social justice, communal well-being, and care of God's creation. However, churches are human institutions, and as such they can easily become the principalities and powers against which Jesus struggled. While church communities often do much good, our churches often exhibit scapegoating, finding unity by condemning those who violate religious taboos and by excluding of those who question church tenets or practices. Jesus said, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Many churches strike me as far from the "kingdom of heaven."

A difficulty is that most churches must successfully market themselves to the public or they will fail to attract members needed to support church buildings and staff. As long as people feel free to join or leave churches, they will seek churches that offer messages that appeal to them. Evidently, many Americans prefer churches that endorse their lifestyles, offer reassurance of God's grace, and maintain a sense of community by scapegoating homosexuals and other marginalized individuals.

How can we generate a loving, just society when Christian institutions, upon which so many people depend for guidance toward righteousness, so often participate in the scapegoating process and victimize others? Will our civilization, like Babylon (Jeremiah 50:39) and countless other past civilizations (Revelation 18:2), be a casualty of arrogance, corruption, and depravity?³⁰

Is There Hope?

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of a friend or foe as from our own; therefore, we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.

Reinhold Niebuhr

Some people expect that technological progress will continue to meet humanity's needs indefinitely. Although science and technology have provided substantial medical and material benefits, they have also produced factory farming, pollution, global warming, nuclear weapons, and sophisticated technologies of population surveillance and control. From a global perspective, we now have sufficient resources to feed, clothe, and shelter everyone, yet extreme poverty remains widespread.

Knowledge can help us make wiser choices, but it seems that our greatest hopes and fears profoundly color how we perceive and analyze reality.³¹ In particular, it seems that fears related to vulnerability and death strongly influence our values and decisions. Desperate to reduce our terror, we tend to cling to violent and destructive worldviews that project our guilt, fears, and hatreds onto other individuals. Therefore, roiling beneath individual facades of psychological equanimity as well as cultural facades of manners and civility are passions that readily lead to injustice and violence. Because we are often slaves to our passions, human rationality alone cannot generate justice and peace. We also need compassion, which does not seem to be associated with intelligence, and wisdom to discern ideologies that benefit society from those that masquerade as good but actually cause harm.

For example, the conviction that one's faith is the only true faith lends itself to violence against competing religions. Commonly, concern that conflicting views will shake the faith of believers and, perhaps more dangerously, mislead children often results in eradication of heretics and apostates, ruthlessly if needed. In contrast, those with the faith of Christ (James 2:1) or "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 2:5) resist the attractions of the scapegoating process. Such people do not necessarily need to identify themselves as Christian or even as religious. Rather, such people naturally find themselves drawn

to caring, compassionate, loving relationships. They have faith that service toward others can generate communities of justice and peace. They believe that we can prevent our deepest hopes and fears from driving us apart. The faith of Christ encourages us to find ways to live and work together with respect, love, and peace, and to make sure that everyone has the food, clothing, shelter, and other resources they need.

There is an urgent need for the widespread adoption of the faith of Christ and its equivalent in non-Christian religions and belief systems. A world dominated by humans, which includes many people who profess faith in Christ but far fewer who manifest the faith of Christ, has been like hell for animals. When it comes to human welfare, the same civilization that has provided effective medicines and surgical techniques, clean water, comfortable housing, wondrous works of art, and numerous other benefits is on a self-destructive path. Christian faith teaches that God will eventually reconcile creation (Isaiah 11:6-9), but humanity will determine the immediate future of human civilization and life on earth.

The stumbling block is that people have always tended to assess their self-worth in relation to other people. This leads to rivalries and conflicts, which have led to violence and scapegoating. If human nature compels us to participate in scapegoating and violence, there would seem to be little hope. Encouragingly, there are individuals and communities that emphasize cooperation and nurturing while discouraging violence. They offer “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6; see also 49:6), confirming that people can transcend their violent tendencies.

Can powerful human motivations be channeled in nonviolent directions? Ernest Becker noted that humans need self-esteem as a salve against the universal fear of death, and he was pessimistic about humanity’s prognosis.³² Frequently, people have responded to their fear of death with behaviors that harm the earth, animals, and fellow humans. Nearly all religions, including Christianity, promise some form of personal immortality, and in theory this should assuage mortality anxieties. Nevertheless, perhaps because they have deep-seated doubts, people have tried, often violently, to eradicate other religions and the “heretical” views within their own religions. The Christian faith discussed in this book does not find itself threatened by alternative views. Consequently, it offers a path to self-esteem, psychological well-being, and communal cohesiveness that does not involve harming anyone else.

Given that most of the world’s people do not identify themselves

as Christian and have little interest in conversion, and given the risks to human civilization from climate change and weapons of mass destruction, we need to find paths toward universal peaceful coexistence. The various religions and secular ideologies of the world must promote guiding principles that promote harmony.

I suggest two guiding principles, both of which accord with nearly all religions and secular ideologies. First, it is good for sentient beings to experience pleasure and avoid pain. For people of faith, this would mean that whatever creative force is responsible for consciousness wants living beings to thrive. Though widespread suffering and early death in nature might generate skepticism about this faith, there is no harm in choosing to live as if it were true. Second, people must be willing to acknowledge that there is a possibility that their specific religious beliefs or secular ideologies might not be true. Certainty impedes personal and communal growth and undermines reconciliation of conflicts.

Some are hopeful that Christians and non-Christians can gravitate toward these guiding principles because the “golden rule” of doing to others as one would want done to oneself appears to be universal among religious and secular ethical systems. However, many are doubtful because so much violence and destructiveness has been done by Christians, non-Christian religionists, and secular ideologues; because humanity has been mired in violence and scapegoating throughout history; and because many contemporary people of faith, including Christians, seem to exhibit hardness of heart. Whether or not Christianity will ultimately help inspire people to save the world from humanity’s destructiveness, the faith of Christ as described in the Bible offers a path toward communal healing, as well as individual salvation. The challenges to human civilization seem imposing, and it is unlikely that we will ever rid ourselves of physical suffering or of anxieties related to mortality. However, Jesus taught that following him can help heal broken relationships and save us from a sense of meaninglessness and despair.

If Jesus could manifest a sense of purpose and show love even while suffering and dying, we too can meet life’s difficulties, including the specter of death that shadows our lives, gracefully. In other words, we can make choices that do not make others suffer, and instead we can help heal the physical and spiritual wounds that life invariably inflicts. I suggest a simple, common denominator for this process: We should strive to be kind to each other and to all other living beings.

Perhaps Christianity's central claim is that God cares about all creation, including each of us, and therefore the ideal is universal peace and harmony. Consequently, faithful Christians should seek to serve God by serving others, which can neutralize our fear of death and give our lives direction, meaning, and joy. I am convinced that this is why Jesus instructed, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

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Notes

Introduction

1. “Christ” comes from the Greek word *Christós*, which literally means “the anointed one.” For Christians, this is Jesus of Nazareth.
2. Paraphrased from *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

Chapter 1: The Scapegoating Process

1. Becker, Ernest. 1973. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press.
2. Many people who have suffered chronic pain or declining health approach death relatively free of fear. For most of us, trying to lead active, productive lives and for whom death does not offer relief from long-term suffering, knowledge of our mortality tends to be very disquieting.
3. Wolfe, Tom. 1979. *The Right Stuff*. New York: Bantam Books.
4. Research using the Terror Management Theory (TMT) paradigm, discussed shortly, has indicated that fears related to stressful social situations (such as giving a speech to a large audience) or physical pain (such as dental procedures) induce anxiety, but they do not seem to generate the same need for self-esteem as death-related anxieties.
5. Becker, Ernest. 1971. *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, 2nd Ed. New York: The Free Press.
6. Solomon, Sheldon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski. 1998. “Tales from the crypt: On the role of death in life.” *Zygon* vol. 33, pp. 9-44.
7. Pyszczynski, Tom, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg. 2003. *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*. Washington, DC, American Psychological Association.
8. Solomon, Sheldon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski. 2015. *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*. New York: Random House.
9. In what might appear to be contradictory evidence, it is my understanding that some forms of meditation, including that of Tibetan Buddhism, begin with a meditation on the inevitability and

unpredictability of death. Evidently, this meditation helps relieve the natural human desire to grasp at life and cling to worldly things. Perhaps, pairing relaxation with mortality salience trains the body to suppress the normal anxiety associated with mortality salience. Some meditators say that the practice reveals that the sense of self is an illusion. This understanding might quell mortality anxiety.

10. Harmon-Jones, Eddie, Linda Simon, Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Holly McGregor. 1997. "Terror management theory and self-esteem: Evidence that increased self-esteem reduces mortality salience effects." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* vol. 72, pp. 24-36.
11. Solomon, op cit. note 8, pp. 144-145.
12. Sheldon, Pavica, Philipp Rauschnabel, and James Honeycutt. 2019 *The Dark Side of Social Media*. San Diego: Academic Press
13. "How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life" [nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html), last accessed 7/12/20.
14. Sometimes political leaders cynically scapegoat innocent individuals to shift blame for a failure or crisis from themselves onto other individuals. The leaders recognize the accusation is false, but the public often believes it.
15. Girard, René. 1972. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. For our purposes, it is important to note that in primal societies ritual sacrifice renews the sense of camaraderie that the original sacrifice engendered.
16. Gadalla, Moustafa. 1999. *Exiled Egyptians: The Heart of Africa* Greensboro, NC: Tehuti Research Foundation.
17. There are some traditions that reject the human desire to participate in mimetic rivalry or to engage in vengeance, most notably Buddhism. However, as Britton Johnson noted in an article that is no longer available on the Internet, this reflects a conscious effort to expunge the human desire to participate in mimetic rivalries and does not necessarily refute the claim that the culture is founded on sacred violence.
18. Girard, René. 1978. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
19. I acknowledge David Sztybel for important insights in developing the ideas of this paragraph.

20. Nuechterlein, Paul J. 2002. "René Girard: The Anthropology of the Cross as Alternative to Post-Modern Literary Criticism." Last accessed 7/12/20 from waynenorthey.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/34be9326bfccfe0db0103b0a34f400a6.pdf.
21. Girard, op. cit., note 15.
22. Girard, René. 1986. *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
23. 1 Samuel 15:22; Isaiah 66:3; Jeremiah 6:20, 7:22; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-22; Micah 6:6-8.
24. Phelps, Norm. 2007. *The Longest Struggle: Animal Advocacy from Pythagoras to PETA*. New York: Lantern; Nelson, Walter Henry. 1996. *Buddha: His Life and His Teaching*. New York, Penguin Putnam.
25. "Myth," as I use the term here, does not mean a false story. As Mary Midgley has written, "Myths are not lies. Nor are they detached stories. They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world." See Midgely, Mary. 2003. *The Myths We Live By*. New York: Routledge, p. 1.
26. Animals care about their well-being in ways similar to humans, such as having enough food, avoiding unpleasant weather, and seeking companionship to degrees natural to their species. Further, many animals are deeply invested emotionally in raising their children and protecting their friends, who may or may not be members of their own species. See Bekoff, Marc and Dale Jamieson, eds. 1990. *Interpretation and Explanation in the Study of Animal Behavior, Volume 1: Interpretation, Intentionality, and Communication*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
27. Fiddes, Nick. 1991. *Meat: A Natural Symbol*. New York: Routledge.
28. Williams, Erin E., and Margo Demello. 2007. *Why Animals Matter: The Case for Animal Protection*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books; Nation Earth Organization. 2006. *Earthlings* [videotape]. Burbank, CA. Approximately 10 billion land animals are killed for food in the United States each year. Laboratory researchers kill roughly 30 million animals annually. About 20 million animals are killed for furs, and the pain of the leghold trap and the miseries of fur farms are among the most horrific examples of animal cruelty. Probably the greatest amount of suffering occurs on factory farms. The practice of tail-docking pigs illustrates the inherent cruelty

of factory farming. Because farmers remove piglets from their mothers ten days after birth, pigs retain a desire to suck and chew into adulthood. If given the chance, they would bite neighboring pigs' tails. Normal pigs would fight off such attacks, but stressed, chronically depressed pigs often fail to fight back. Their skin could become infected, which would cost money to treat, leaving farmers with the choice to absorb this expense or kill infected pigs. To stop pigs from engaging in this tail-biting "vice," the U.S. Department of Agriculture has recommended that farmers cut off most of the piglets' tail, a procedure done without painkillers, often leaving a small, sensitive stump. If another pig tries to bite a pig's tail stump, the pain is so intense that the pig will fight back, reducing the risk of an infection. While such a strategy to avoid this consequence of factory farming strikes me as diabolical, it makes perfect economic sense, as long as the pain and suffering of pigs have no value. (Polan, Michael. 2006. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York, NY: Penguin Press, p. 218.)

29. Midgley, Mary. 1995. *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. London: Routledge; Midgley, Mary. 1984. *Animals and Why They Matter*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
30. Griffin, Donald R. 1992. *Animal Minds*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; De Waal, Frans. 2016. *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* New York: W.W. Norton.
31. Bekoff, Marc. 2007. *The Emotional Lives of Animals*. Navato, CA: New World Library; Masson, J. Moussaieff. 2003. *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals*. New York: Ballantine Books; Balcombe, Jonathan. 2010. *Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
32. Rose, Margaret and David Adams. "Evidence for pain and suffering in other animals," in Langley, Gill, ed. 1989. *Animal Experimentation: The Consensus Changes*. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, pp. 42-71; Grandin, Temple, and Catherine Johnson. 2005. *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*. New York: Scribner.
34. National Trappers Association. Undated. *NTA Trapping Handbook* Sutton, NE: Spearman, p. 4.

Chapter 2: The Hebrew Scriptures

1. Sproul, R.C. 2005. *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine*. Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publications; Evans, Anthony T. 2004. *The Transforming Word: Discovering the Power and Provision of the Bible*. Chicago, Moody Publishers; Snow, Eric V. "Is the Bible the Word of God?" Last accessed 7/12/20 from rae.org/bibref.html.
2. Burr, William Henry. 1987. *Self-Contradictions of the Bible*. New York: A.J. Davis & Company (original publication 1860); Ehrman, Bart D. 2000. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press; Ehrman, Bart D. 2007. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. New York: HarperCollins.
3. Wroe, Ann. 1999. *Pontius Pilate*. New York: Random House. I thank Robert Kalechofsky for helpful insights on this point.
4. I acknowledge Rev. Lisa Hadler for this observation.
5. Gamble, Harry Y. 1985. *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
6. The Bible is comprised of words, and words do not have absolute inerrant meanings. Instead, words have different meanings to different people. In learning language, which is a lifelong activity, we learn what words mean by observing how others use them. Because each of us has different experiences as we learn language, our understandings of words' meanings can differ subtly or markedly from others' understandings. Each of us has a unique language, but our use of words is sufficiently similar to allow effective communication of ideas. Still, misunderstandings are common, particularly among people with different social backgrounds. Therefore, each of us will interpret the Bible's words in slightly different ways, and no one way is exclusively "correct," including a reading of the Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek. Even if God directed the Bible's authors, nobody can know what God intended to communicate because each of us receives the Bible's words with our own, unique language. Adding to this language difficulty, there is considerable uncertainty about the meaning of many ancient Hebrew and Greek words, particularly seldom-used words, and some of the Hebrew and Greek words do not have close analogues in the English language. Biblical translations must rely on analyses of how the ancient Hebrew and Greek words were used elsewhere

in the canonized literature and noncanonical texts around the time as the Bible's writers. Because the limits of human knowledge limit the accuracy of translations, there are often multiple reasonable but different interpretations of certain passages.

The New Testament contains further language difficulties. Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and his sayings were related by listeners whose memories were likely faulty, at least in the details. Also, the Aramaic sayings of Jesus and his disciples were translated into Greek, the original language of the New Testament. No original Gospels remain, and scholars dispute the relative authenticity of copies that contain differences among them. Many Christians regard Mark 16:9-20, which includes Jesus claiming that believers will speak in tongues, handle serpents, and cure diseases by laying on their hands, as authentic. However, scholars generally agree that the earliest Mark Gospel did not contain this material (see Ehrman, *op. cit.* note 2, pp. 65-68). In fact, there are many points of disagreement among ancient copies of the Gospels.

7. Another difficulty relates to problems inherent in our interpreting the Bible's sayings and stories. No one hears or reads a story without beliefs, values, experiences, and preconceived notions that color how one interprets the story. For example, when pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian observers viewed media coverage of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980s, both groups strongly believed that the coverage was biased heavily toward the other side. (See Vallone, Robert P., Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper. 1985. "The hostile media phenomenon: Biased perception and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the Beirut massacre." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* vol. 49, pp. 577-585; see also Perloff, Richard M. 1989. "Ego-involvement and the third person effect of televised news coverage." *Communication Research* vol. 16, pp. 236-262.) Preconceived values and prejudices help explain how slave owners once interpreted certain biblical passages as endorsing slavery, but today nearly all Christians interpret these same passages very differently.

A related difficulty is that, no matter how much translators have attempted to be accurate, their biases have no doubt influenced their work. There are many Hebrew and ancient Greek words whose meanings are unclear or which do not translate readily into other tongues. Here, translators' views of what they think the Bible is trying to say invariably affect the translations. Those who compare

- English translations will find important differences in certain passages that have had broad implications for Christian theology.
8. Scientific investigations – primarily studies of animals in their natural habitats – have found that many animals today exhibit evidence of thoughts, feelings, and self-awareness. See Bekoff, Marc. 2006. *Animal Passions and Beastly Virtues*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Masson, Jeffrey Moussaieff. 1995. *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*. New York: Delacorte; Midgley, Mary. “Persons and Non-Persons,” in Singer, Peter, ed. 1985. *In Defense of Animals*. New York: Basil Blackwell, pp. 52-62.
 9. There is certainly archeological evidence that creatures prior to *Homo sapiens* possessed human self-consciousness. For example, the elaborate death rituals of the Neanderthals indicate that they anticipated that their sense of self would participate in of some kind of afterlife. Further, there is scientific evidence of empathy in some animals. This not only illustrates moral character among animals but also suggests an important degree of abstract thinking ability. In one study, rhesus monkeys, upon pulling one of two chains to get food, observed through a one-way mirror a second rhesus monkey receiving a simultaneous electric shock. One chain caused a fellow monkey to receive an electric shock and the other did not. Ten of fifteen monkeys preferred the non-shock chain, and two monkeys did not pull either chain, preferring instead to go without food for 5 days and 12 days. Self-starvation was more likely among monkeys who had previously received electric shocks themselves. (Masserman, Jules H., Stanley Wechkin, and William Terris. 1964. “‘Altruistic’ behavior in rhesus monkeys.” *American Journal of Psychiatry* vol. 121, pp. 584-585.) In the documentary *People of the Forest*, an adult male chimpanzee watched over and protected an unrelated, crippled, adolescent chimpanzee from the torment of other adolescent chimpanzees. (Van Lawick, Hugo, director. 1991. *People of the Forest*, Discovery Channel Video.)
 10. Girard, René. 1972 [1977]. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
 11. It has been my impression, based on experiences leafleting and tabling, as well as e-mail messages to the Christian Vegetarian Association, that this is the most frequently cited passage among those aiming to defend meat eating.
 12. Williams, James G. 1991. *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*.

Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, pp. 46-50.

13. Ibid., pp. 29-54.

14. Alison, James. 2003. "Violence & Christian Faith," in *James Alson in Santa Fe* [audiotape], August 22.

15. Miles, Jack. 1995. *God: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 314-328.

16. Ibid., p. 323.

17. Ibid., pp. 318-323.

18. Ibid.

19. Schwager, Raymund. 2000 [original publication in German 1978]. *Must There be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, pp. 60-61.

20. Ibid., p. 61.

21. Ibid., p. 93.

22. Although many Christians believe that Jesus assumed the role of the Suffering Servant, I do not think the Suffering Servant story was written by the ancient Hebrews to predict Jesus' mission. To my reading, the Hebrew Scriptures do not indicate that the Suffering Servant is a future personage. Further, Isaiah 53:2-3 describes the Suffering Servant as ugly and friendless, which does not accord with New Testament accounts of Jesus.

23. The New International Version, which is popular among Christians who favor substitutionary atonement theory (see Chapter 13), is distinctive in translating Jeremiah 7:22 as follows: "For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices." Adding the word "just" completely changes the passage's meaning.

Chapter 3: The Life and Death of Jesus

1. Girard, René. 2001. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991; Heim, S. Mark. *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006.

2. Campbell, Joseph. 1972. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Princeton: Princeton University Press.

3. Scholars have noted that the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) identify disputes between Jesus and particular Jewish groups and authorities, notably the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and high priests. By the time John's Gospel was written, the Jewish Christian movement had been overwhelmed by Gentile Christianity. There was little reason for the community for whom John wrote to distinguish among the various Jewish groups that had opposed Jesus' ministry. Consequently, John's Gospel describes Jesus' Jewish opponents simply as "the Jews."
4. Bailie, Gil. 1997. *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, p. 218. Here, "all" refers to the people present at the Crucifixion.
5. Girard, René. 1978. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
6. Funk, Robert W. and The Jesus Seminar. *The Acts of Jesus: What Did Jesus Really Do?* 1998. New York: HarperCollins; Erdman, Bart D. *The New Testament, Lecture 1* [audiotape series]. 2000. Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company.
7. Armstrong, Karen. 2004. *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb out of Darkness*. New York: Knopf.
8. Girard, René. 1972. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press; Girard, René 1978. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Chapter 4: Jesus as Teacher

1. Regenstein, Lewis G. 1991. *Replenish the Earth*. New York: Crossroad Publishing; Schwartz, Richard H. 2001. *Judaism and Vegetarianism*. New York: Lantern Books; Linzey, Andrew. 1987. *Christianity and the Rights of Animals*. New York: Crossroad Publishing.
2. Nuechterlein, Paul J. July 20-21, 1996. "Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World." Last accessed 7/19/20 from girardianlectionary.net/year_a/proper11a_1996_ser.htm.
3. I am struck by parallels between the parable of the lost sheep and

Genesis 18:24-33, in which Abraham asked God whether God would spare Sodom if there were 50 righteous people there. God answered that he would spare the city for the sake of the righteous ones, and Abraham repeatedly asked the question, each time reducing the number of righteous people until he asked a final time, saying, “I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.” God said that he would save the city if there were only ten righteous people. Then God departed, and, to my reading, the text indicates that Abraham did not dare to ask whether God would save an entire city of sinful people on behalf of a single righteous person. The reason, I think, is that the ancient Hebrews were unprepared to consider that God would abandon his plans for the sake of a single innocent individual. The logic of sacrifice holds that individuals – even innocent individuals – are expendable for the sake of the larger community. Jesus rejected the notion that sacrificing even one individual for the rest of the community accords with God’s desires.

Chapter 5: Some Thoughts about Jesus

1. Girard, René. 1972. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; Girard, René. 1978. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
2. Some translations use a gender-neutral term, which I prefer, because women as well as men must play crucial roles in the reconciliation of God’s creation.
3. Nuechterlein, Paul J. July 27, 2003. “The God of Abundance.” Last accessed 7/12/20 from girardianlectionary.net/year_b/proper12b_2003_ser.htm. proper12b.

Chapter 6: The Pauline Letters and Christian Faith

1. Nuechterlein, Paul J. 2005. “My Core Convictions: Nonviolence and the Christian Faith.” Last accessed 7/17/20 from girardianlectionary.net/core_convictions.htm; Schwager, Raymund. 1987. *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, pp. 214-220.

2. Some commentators have argued that the wrath of God was directed at pagans who “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles” (Romans 1:23). However, to my reading, their offense was failure to “honor” God. They ended up engaging in “dishonorable passions” (Romans 1:26) “and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25). In other words, they allowed human desires to distract them from faithfulness to God.
3. Paul wrote, “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God” (Romans 3:1-2). Here, Paul reminded readers that the law was what God used to exert divine will prior to the arrival of Jesus. Jews, having been entrusted with the law, had a special mission and privilege. Paul continued (Romans 3:3-4),

What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every man be false, as it is written, “That thou mayest be justified in thy words, and prevail when thou art judged.”

Paul had begun his letter to the Romans by discussing how everyone sins and fails to fully live according to the law. Yet, even when Jews were unfaithful, God remained faithful to the Jews. God’s promise to them was honored in spite of their faithlessness.

Now we come to a key verse, Romans 3:5: “But if our wickedness serves to show the justice of God, what shall we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)” Paul said that, because we cannot avoid being wicked, God’s justice prevents God from condemning us. But, if God does not condemn us, is God unjust to inflict wrath on us? Paul then notes that this is a human way of speaking about it. This “human way” of thinking incorrectly attributes the wrath to God, which is what people have been doing since the beginning of human culture. People have always attributed their misfortunes to their god or gods, and they have offered sacrifices to appease the divine.

Romans 3:6-7 reads, “By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my falsehood God’s truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?” Because we are all sinners, God cannot judge the world according to our sinfulness. Despite our sinfulness, God’s truth abounds in God’s glory.

What is God's truth and glory? I think God's glory involves creative goodness, and the truth is that God does not want suffering or violence in God's creation (see Romans 8:18-22).

God's love of Paul, a sinner, exemplifies God's love for all creation because only God's loving forgiveness – not Paul's actions – can justify Paul. Why did Paul say that he was condemned as a sinner? It was because he lived among humans who were judgmental and vengeful.

4. Nuechterlein, op. cit., note 1.
5. I do think that Paul regarded Jesus as a divine figure, but I am doubtful that he saw Jesus as God incarnate who we should worship as God.
6. Nuechterlein, op cit., note 1.

Chapter 7: Forgiveness

1. Nuechterlein, Paul J. 2005. "Second Sunday of Easter – Year A." Last accessed 7/12/20 from girardianlectionary.net/year_a/easter2a.htm.
2. In Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, Jesus cries, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This echoes Psalm 22, in which the psalmist's lament is followed by a faith-filled proclamation of the psalmist's faith in God.
3. I acknowledge Julie Shinnick for her contributions to this topic.
4. Bailie, Gil (undated). *The Gospel of John* [audiotape series]. Glen Ellen, CA: The Cornerstone Forum.
5. Wiesenthal, Simon. 1976. *The Sunflower*. New York: Schocken Books.
6. Storey, Peter. 1997. "A different kind of justice: Truth and reconciliation in South Africa." *The Christian Century* vol. 114, pp. 788-793.

Chapter 8: The Power of Love versus the Power of Satan

1. I think dangerous and other pathological relationships invalidate the covenantal agreement.
2. See Chapter 5, note 2.
3. Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth. 1991. *On Life After Death*. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts.
4. Nuechterlein, Paul J. February 22-23, 1997. "Satan the Accuser and God the Chooser." Last accessed 7/19/20 from girardianlectionary.net/year_b/lent2b_1997_ser.htm.
5. Girard, René. 2001. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
6. Girard, René. 1986. *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 184-197.
7. Pacifism remains a contentious issue among Christians. Some believe that Christians are called to pacifism regardless of the consequences. Others have argued that refusal to use physical force in defense of vulnerable individuals invites abuse of the innocent. Personally, I think that Christianity calls us to be peacemakers, but I am not a committed pacifist. Although I recognize that the scapegoating process and selfish desires often underlie conflicts, in certain situations it seems reasonable and appropriate to use force, even lethal force, as a last resort to stop greater violence or injustice.
8. Gil Bailie. Undated. *The Gospel of John* [audiotape], tape 10. Glen Ellen, CA: The Cornerstone Forum; Gospel Communications International; Anonymous. Undated. "Commentary: Jesus Speaks of Both His Relation to the Father and His Disciples' Relation to the Father". Last accessed 7/19/20 from [biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP- NT/John/Jesus-Speaks-Both-Relation](http://biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/John/Jesus-Speaks-Both-Relation).
9. Many people expect a life-after-death in heaven in which all our desires will be met. However, mimetic theory tells us that it is not reasonable to view heaven as a place of unlimited resources that satisfies all our desires because, as acquisitive mimetic creations, much of the reason we derive satisfaction from gaining the objects of desire is that they are scarce. Because so many of our terrestrial desires remain unsatisfied, an everlasting heavenly existence in which all our desires are fulfilled sounds appealing. However, one

might anticipate that such a place would eventually become intolerably boring.

Chapter 9: Healing

1. Ellis, Colter and Leslie Irvine. 2010. "Reproducing Dominion; Emotional apprenticeship in the 4-H Youth Livestock Program" *Society and Animals* vol. 18, pp. 21-39; Animal Place. 2003. *The Emotional World of Farm Animals* [videotape]. Vacaville, CA; Robbins, John. *The Food Revolution*. Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 2001, pp. 153-164.
2. Dunayer, Joan. 2001. *Animal Equality: Language and Liberation*. Derwood, MD: Ryce Publishing.
3. Allison, James. 1998. *The Joy of Being Wrong*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, pp. 119-125.
4. For insightful commentary, see Alison, James. 2001. *Faith beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*. New York: Crossroad, pp. 3-26.

Chapter 10: Peacemaking

1. Akers, Keith. 2013. *Disciples: How Jewish Christianity Shaped Jesus and Shattered the Church*. Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press.
2. Vaclavik, Charles L. 1986. *The Vegetarianism of Jesus Christ*. Three Rivers, CA: Kaweah Publishing Company.
3. Sharp, Gene. *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Boston: Extending Horizon Books, 1973; Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. 2011. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Chapter 11: Prophetic Witness

1. Bailie, Gil. 1997. *Violence Unveiled*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, pp. 167-184.
2. Tannehill, Robert C. 1986. *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, p. 37.
3. Coffin, William Sloane. 2004. *Credo*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 49.

Chapter 12: The Realm of God

1. Loy, David. 1988. *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*. New Jersey; Humanities Press: Shlain, Leonard. 1998. *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image*. New York: Viking Penguin; Grandin, Temple and Catherine Johnson. 2005. *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*. New York: Scribner.

Grandin discussed how, as a consequence of her autism, she thinks with images rather than language. She maintained that animals similarly think with images, and she has gained a reputation as an expert in understanding and treating animal behavior problems and at devising ways to reduce animal stress on farms and at slaughterhouses.

2. Kushner, Harold S. 1983. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Avon.
3. On what grounds might one claim certainty about the nature of God? One can establish attributes of God as fundamental statements of faith, but this does not constitute evidence for one's claims. Indeed, many people accept a particular set of beliefs about God "on faith," but this seems to merely reflect prejudice for the tenets of their culture. Someone raised in a different culture would be equally justified in adhering to a vastly different set of beliefs about God. Many people relate personal experiences of divine presence, but our hopes, fears, and prejudices can color our experiences and how we interpret them. Furthermore, the brain can influence the mind. For example, people with temporal lobe epilepsy sometimes relate experiences of divine presence that often result in persistent, firm convictions about God, the afterlife, and other religious issues. (See Dewhurst, Kenneth and A.W. Beard. 1970. "Sudden religious conversions in temporal lobe epilepsy." *British Journal of Psychiatry* vol. 117, pp. 497-507.)

Another approach is to derive conclusions about God's nature by carefully observing God's world and its inhabitants. This approach might lead to reasonable conclusions about God's nature, but empirical observations cannot provide certainty. Our senses and our ability to interpret data are imperfect, and there is always the possibility that new evidence could contradict our theories.

Chapter 13: Problems with Sacrificial Theologies

1. Kaufman, Stephen R. "A Nonviolent Reading of The Letter to the Hebrews and The Revelation of John." Last accessed 7/12/20 from christianveg.org/nonviolent-reading.htm.
2. Webb, Eugene. 2005. "René Girard and the symbolism of religious sacrifice." *Anthropoetics* 11(1). Available at anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1101/webb, last accessed 7/12/20.
3. Becoming human involves developing human self-consciousness, as discussed in Chapter 2. Human self-consciousness plays a crucial role in humanity's distinctive (but not necessarily exclusive) fear of death, need for self-esteem, and acquisitive mimetic desire.
4. Kirk, Peter. "Augustine's Mistake about Original Sin." Last accessed 7/19/20 from gentlewisdom.org/246/augustines-mistake-about-sin.
5. Andrew [computer screen name]. "Evolution of Doctrine: Original Sin." Last accessed March 23, 2015 from theogeek.blogspot.com/2007/09/evolution-of-doctrine-original-sin.html.
6. Becker, Ernest. 1975. *Escape from Evil*. New York: The Free Press.
7. Roman law had exempted the Jews from worshipping the emperor because the Jews had made it clear that they would rather die than betray their faith. When the Jewish Christian movement broke away from the synagogue, its members no longer enjoyed the protection of the "Jewish exception."
8. Pagels, Elaine. 1988. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*. New York: Random House, p. 73; see also Webb, Eugene. "Augustine's New Trinity: The Anxious Circle of Metaphor," in Williams, Michael A., Collett Cox, and Martin S. Jaffee (eds.) 1992. *Religious Innovation: Essays in Interpretation of Religious Change*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 191-214.
9. Pagels, op. cit. note 8, pp. 98-99.
10. Ibid., p. 73.
11. Hall, Douglas John. 2003. *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pp. 171-172.
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18. Youths involved in 4-H or similar programs typically name the animals for whom they must care until the animal is sold for slaughter. They often find betraying the animal's friendship and trust heartbreaking. Evidently in an effort to desensitize the youths, adults often encourage them to give names that relate to the animal's destiny, such as *Sausage Patty* (the title of a nice children's book by Diane Allevato, published by Animal Place, 1998).
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31. William Sloane Coffin wrote, "That God is against the status quo is one of the hardest things to believe if you are a Christian who happens to profit by the status quo. In fact, most of us don't really believe it, not in our heart of hearts. We comfort ourselves with the thought that because our intentions are good (nobody gets up in the morning and says, "Who can I oppress today?"), we do not have to examine the consequences of our actions. As a matter of fact, many of us are even eager to respond to injustice, as long as we can do so without having to confront the causes of it." Coffin, William Sloane. 2004. *Credo*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 64.
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About the Author

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They Shall Not Hurt or Destroy: Animal Rights and Vegetarianism in the Western Religious Traditions by Vasu Murti, 2003, 137 pp.

“This is THE comprehensive reference work that documents the writings of mainstream religious and spiritual leaders who, from antiquity, have taught that compassion and kindness must mark our relationship with non-human as well as human beings. The author also reviews the observations of secular spokespersons, past and present, who through the centuries have championed the cause of compassion for animals, and for their rights as fellow beings.”

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– Rev. Frank L. and Mary Hoffman, www.all-creatures.org ministry

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– Norm Phelps, author of *The Dominion of Love: Animal Rights According to the Bible*; *The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights*; and *The Longest Struggle: Animal Advocacy from Pythagoras to PETA*



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